HISTORY OF THE WESSON, MISSISSIPPI COTTON MILLS AND MILL WORKERS

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A HISTORY OF THE WESSON, MISSISSIPPI COTTON MILLS AND MILL WORKERS

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A History of the Wesson, Mississippi Cotton Mills and Mill Workers

Jessica E. Friedman

I. Colonel James Madison Wesson and the Mills at Bankston, Mississippi: 1847-1864

Industrialization in the pre-Civil War South was at a much lower level than in the North. Mississippi's first successful mechanically powered cotton mill was organized in 1848 in the town of Bankston, in Choctaw County, and became "famous through the Old Southwest as a model of industrial efficiency and profitability." The founder of the Bankston cotton mill was Colonel James Madison Wesson, known as "the father of Mississippi cotton manufacturing." Colonel Wesson was part of a company in Columbus, Georgia that transferred their operations to the deep interior of Mississippi during the winter of 1847-48, recruiting about thirty experienced mill families from Georgia to work in the mills. Bankston's "Mississippi Manufacturing Company" was incorporated by an Act of the Mississippi Legislature in January 1848 and became one of the most efficient textile mills in Mississippi before the Civil War.[1]

During this time it was difficult to secure native white workers to perform industrial labor, so the general rule was to import Northern labor. The mills did use slave labor to perform some of the simpler operations, but Northern workers were brought in to do the skilled work. Some of the slave laborers were owned by the mill itself, but most

[1] INDEX OF MISSISSIPPI SESSION ACTS 1817-1865, at 194 (1937); Narvell Strickland, *A History of Mississippi Cotton Mills and The Sounders Magnolia Mill Village* 3, 10 (Feb. 1995) (thesis, Southeastern Louisiana University); Darryl S. Wesson, *James Madison Wesson—Industrialist, Innovator, Humanitarian* (Jan. 1., 1966) (unpublished research paper, Mississippi State University). By the beginning of the Civil war, Mississippi had four major textile mills: The Mississippi Manufacturing Company in Bankston, the Edward McGehee Mill in Woodville, the Thomas Green Mill in Jackson, and the Mississippi State Penitentiary Mill. Strickland, *supra*, at 17; Wesson, *supra*.

were owned by nearby plantation owners who leased them to the mill; this provided labor with small overhead cost to the mills. The mill owned slaves were provided food, shelter, and clothing, and the owners of the leased slaves were paid for their labors depending on the work they performed. The Bankston Mill employed mostly white employees in all its departments, except in the very dusty preparatory departments, "not because black is not equal to the task, but because white is cheapest and really more efficient." This policy was in line with most antebellum Southern factories, although slaves worked in the spinning and weaving rooms of a few textile mills. When slave prices rose, most textile manufacturers turned to poor whites for cheap labor.[2]

At the time Mississippi seceded from the Union, the Bankston factory's labor force consisted of eighty-five white mill workers, forty-five men and forty women, who worked for wages below the average prevailing rate throughout the Southern industry as a whole. Because the textile industry was among the lowest paying fields, these white employees received "little more than starvation wages." This low pay was offset by the Bankston mill providing housing for the workers and their families, and supplying them with meat, meal, flour, and vegetables produced by the firm's mills or farms. Colonel Wesson himself, in recommending other Southern factories employ white labor, noted that hiring white workers "affords the means of an honest living acquired by their own

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[2] JACQUELYN DOWD HALL ET AL., LIKE A FAMILY: THE MAKING OF A SOUTHERN COTTON MILL WORKER 66 (2000); Letter from James M. Wesson, President, Mississippi Manufacturing Company, to John F. H. Claiborne (Aug. 11, 1858) (J.F.H. Claiborne Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina); Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 10; John Walter, *J.M. Wesson and the Mississippi Manufacturing Company* (May 1994), *reprinted in* 1 Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills 33-40 (unpublished compilation by Rilla A. Smith, Charles W. Phillips & Henry F. Smith); Wesson, *supra* note 1.

labour to many poor destitute families, widows and orphans, who would otherwise be compelled to live upon what they could get from friends and from charity."[3]

A religious man and a strong believer in the notion that "whisky and manufacturing did not mix," Colonel Wesson located his factory far off the beaten path and the temptations of city life. In 1858, he explained the rational behind this philosophy: "The difficulty of getting labour that is profitable to both the employer and the employee is removed by raising up in our midst workmen that are sober and that will take care of their wages and economize their time." The mill workers and families attended church weekly and the children received Sunday school instruction, so that each child was "instructed in letters and elevated in morals" in addition to being "brought up to industrious sobriety."[4]

Before the war began, Colonel Wesson and his company of industrial builders and workers were involved in a sound business enterprise, producing "shoddy"—a cheaply made course cotton fabric—primarily for slaves' clothing. After the war started, everything changed drastically. Colonel Wesson believed that Southerners needed to industrialize to transcend their colonial status: "The South stands in the same relation to New England now, that we as a nation did to Old England fifty years ago. . . . [I]f it was good policy for us then, as a nation, to adopt and support a general system of manufacturing the same policy is equally good now when applied to the South." With the Northern mills no longer providing textiles to the South, local industry experienced enormous growth. It took most of 1861 to complete the transition to producing better

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[3] Letter from James M. Wesson, *supra* note 2; Charles W. Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi* (Jan. 26 1993), *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 2, at 55; Wesson, *supra* note 1; Walter, s*upra* note 2, at 35.

[4] Letter from James M. Wesson, *supra* note 2; Wesson, *supra* note 1.

grade material, and a larger quantity of material was needed to clothe the growing Confederate Army.[5] The problem Colonel Wesson faced was finding the necessary labor force to meet the challenge. Many local plantation owners were unwilling to reduce their labor forces because of their own demands. Most of the young Southern men were off to war, leaving only the elderly, women, and children. Female and child labor was used, but the need still far exceeded the supply of labor. To remedy this problem, Colonel Wesson turned to the Confederate Army for help, requesting that men skilled in certain fields be assigned to work at the Bankston mill. By April, 1863, the Mississippi Manufacturing Company was receiving detailed military labor and had begun to produce shoes and leather goods in addition to textiles. Eventually, the company had seven thriving operations—a tannery, a shoe manufactury, a brick-yard, a wheat mill, a grist mill, a sawmill, and a giant textile mill.[6]

During the first years of the war, the Bankston mills actively participated in the production of war goods. The Bankston factory was producing shoes for the soldiers and Colonel Wesson helped feed and clothe Mississippi's destitute families, making it known that no soldier's wife should come to him for a bushel of meal without receiving it. Union troops destroyed most of the state's factories, including its textile industries, during the Vicksburg campaign of 1863, and the Bankston mills were an obvious target. The detailed soldiers working in the factories and the remaining white workers were organized into a local defense company, and the mills received artillery pieces from the Confederate Army. The Bankston mills survived 1963 because of their isolated location,

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[5] Early confederate uniforms were frequently made of shoddy, and proved to be useless under the conditions of military life. By the end of the War, although the southern economy was in dire straits, the soldiers were better clothed than at the outset. Walter, *supra* note 2, at 35.

[6] Letter from James M. Wesson, *supra* note 2; Walter, *supra* note 2, at 34-36; Wesson, *supra* note 1.

and the company never encountered the federal troops. At that point, the Mississippi Manufacturing Company became the major textile company in the state.[7]

Perhaps foreseeing that Bankston was a legitimate military target and that the union troops would soon find their location, Colonel Wesson began searching for a site to rebuild his industry in early 1864. On December 30, 1864, when federal raids swept through the region, the Bankston Mills were burned to the ground. Among Mississippi's pre-Civil War industrial entrepreneurs, only Colonel Wesson "retained enough of his original energy, determination, and financial resources to build another factory after the war" and remain in the textile business during Reconstruction.[8]

II. Mississippi Manufacturing Company at Wesson: 1864-1871

Early in 1864, Colonel Wesson and two associates, W. H. Hallam and James Hamilton, organized to find a site for the location of a new factory. In the pine forests and wilderness near the Copiah and Lincoln County line and on the dividing ridge between the Mississippi and Pearl Rivers, they selected a site that was later to be named in honor of its founder. Colonel Wesson sought to establish the new mill along the lines of transportation, and this site was on the New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago Railroad. The location was also near the timber town of Bahala—later renamed Beauregard. Colonel Wesson's first move at this new site was to build a sawmill, just as he had done at Bankston, to provide building materials for the new industry and the homes of the

[7] Strickland, *supra* note1, at 18; Walter, *supra* note 2, at 37; Wesson, *supra* note 1.
[8] WILLIAM C. HARRIS, PRESIDENTIAL RECONSTRUCTION IN MISSISSIPPI 25-26 (1967); Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 18; Wesson, *supra* note 1.

owners, officers, and employees. The Mississippi Legislature incorporated the site as the town of Wesson on March 31, 1964.[9]

After the Bankston mills were destroyed, Colonel Wesson and his associates received a charter in early 1865 to establish the Mississippi Manufacturing Company and began to rebuild a cotton mill in Wesson. During this time, he had a Confederate artillery company assigned to the Wesson mill to protect it. Although it survived the Civil War, circumstances brought about by the end of the war in the spring of 1865 brought a temporary halt to his work. By 1866, however, the Mississippi Manufacturing Company was producing textiles again and seventy-six houses for workers were completed. The Mississippi Legislature extended the corporate limits that same year to provide additional housing for the thriving company. The equipment and machinery that was installed in the plant was the newest and best available in the North. With Colonel Wesson as its President and General Manager, by the fall of 1876, the Mississippi Manufacturing Company was the largest such manufacturer in Mississippi. He developed the method of bringing the cotton fields close to the mills to save freight, insurance, storage, and commission costs; thus, Wesson could give a better price for cotton than other cities on the railroad.[10]

Besides the building of the one-story brick cotton mill in the center of town, many company homes were built for both the employees and the officials of the mill—and the town of Wesson began to develop around the mill and its workers. Most of the original employees from Bankston were recruited to work at the Wesson mill, and Colonel

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[9] HARRIS, *supra* note 8, at 224; DURR WALKER & DAVID HIGGS, WESSON: INDUSTRIAL CITY OF THE SOUTH 17 (1995); Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 20; Wesson, *supra* note 1.

[10] HARRIS, *supra* note 8, at 225; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 19; Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 20; Walter, *supra* note 2, at 40; Wesson, *supra* note 1; Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001).

Wesson continued the policy of hiring only white workers. Apparently, there were no black residents in Wesson, other than domestic servants, and Copiah County as a whole boasted the largest white population in the state during the period from 1823 to 1869. The mill had its own commissary and the employees were able to purchase all of their supplies from company-owned store. The commissary would advance the workers against their wages. Colonel Wesson also donated land for three church sites—Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian—and contributed supplies for the building of the churches. Before the town of Wesson was incorporated, there were open saloons in the area, but here, just as in Bankston, a clause was written in the charter that prohibited the sale of alcohol within the corporate limits of Wesson.[11]

While the town of Wesson and its textile mill were to eventually flourish and become a prime example of successful post-war industry, Congressional Reconstruction, the "Black and Tan Convention" of 1868,[12] and the events following the adoption of the Constitution of 1868-69 created problems for Colonel Wesson. Around late 1870 to early 1871, the company went bankrupt, and Colonel Wesson was forced to sell the lands and machinery belonging to the Mississippi Manufacturing Company at a sale in bankruptcy.[13]

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[11] GOODSPEED, 2 BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL MEMOIRS OF MISSISSIPPI 534 (1891); C. VANN WOODWARD, ORIGINS OF THE NEW SOUTH, 1877-1913, at 60 (Wendell Holmes Stephenson & E. Merton Coulter eds, 1971); Rev. Dr. T.R. West, *Capt. William Oliver*, WESSON MIRROR, July 18, 1891; Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi*, *supra* note 3, at 55, 58; Mary Rea Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 2, at 62; Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 20; Wesson *supra* note 1; Some History of the Mills in Wesson and the Town of Wesson; Ante-Bellum Homes.

[12] One of the sixteen black delegates to the Convention was Emanual Handy of Copiah County, who continued his career as a member of the State legislature. Two other black men from Copiah County involved in politics were Tom Sinclair, National Union Republican party nominee for Secretary of State in 1869, and R. R. Applewhite, a member of the first legislature under the 1869 Constitution. VERNON LANE WHARTON, THE NEGRO IN MISSISSIPPI, 1865-1890, at 147, 154-55, 173 (1965).

[13] An Act to Incorporate the Mississippi Mills (April 13, 1871), *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 2, at 65; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 19; Nancy Hamilton, *Wesson*

III. The Mississippi Mills, the Workers, and the Village: 1871-1891

A. The Mississippi Mills

The summer of 1871 brought a new beginning to the town of Wesson, especially the mill village. A group of New Orleans businessmen purchased the Mississippi Manufacturing Company for $200,000 and reincorporated the textile mill under the name "Mississippi Mills" on April 13. It reopened with John T. Hardie as President and William Oliver as Secretary and Treasurer. Captain Oliver, a former member of the Confederate Army in Louisiana, moved his family to Wesson to manage the Mississippi Mills, without any knowledge of the manufacturing business. After a few years of successful operation, his management skills were put to the test after the mill burned in 1973. Discouraged by the mill's destruction, Hardie and other shareholders sold their stock, and the company was reorganized with Colonel Edmund Richardson as President and Captain Oliver, the General Manager, in the office of Secretary and Treasurer. Under the management of Captain Oliver and the financial backing of Colonel Richardson, the Mississippi Mills would thrive and become known as the "Lowell of the South."[14]

Colonel Edmund Richardson, the world's largest planter and the South's largest manufacturer of cotton during his time, was justly termed "a representative Southern man." Although financially wrecked after the Civil War, in 1868 he inaugurated the

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Scene, *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills *supra* note 2, at 135; Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 20-21. After paying his debts, Colonel Wesson was financially ruined and moved to nearby Bogue Chitto. The father of the Mississippi cotton textile industry died in 1899. WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 12; Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 21.

[14] An Act to Incorporate the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 13, at 74; GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 533; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 32; *A Thriving Town*, WESSON MIRROR, Mar. 22, 1889; *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, HAZLEHURST COURIER, Jan. 18, 1906; Evelyn Williams & Mrs. Paul Little, *Wesson*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, June 5, 1964; Wesson, *supra* note 1. This title refers to "Francis Cabot Lowell, great pioneer in textile manufacturing, and the city he established in Massachusetts." Wesson, *supra* note 1.

system of growing cotton with convict labor leased from the State of Mississippi.[15] He made a fortune under the convict leasing system and soon acquired the title "Cotton King of the World."[16] Like Colonel Wesson, Colonel Richardson believed that the place for cotton mills was near the cotton fields and took over the project of rebuilding the Mississippi Mills to test this theory. As the largest stockholder,[17] Colonel Richardson financed the mills and directed all profits into the treasury of the mills instead of declaring the earnings out as dividends—a splendid plant was the result.[18]

Wesson did not see much of Colonel Richardson,[19] who left the running of the mills in Captain Oliver's hands. When asked why he did not build more factories like the profitable one in Wesson, Colonel Richardson said, "I would be glad to do so if I could get more William Olivers to manage them." Captain Oliver took an interest in all of the community affairs, such as the public school and municipal government, and was especially interested in the welfare of the mill workers, calling them "his people" and refusing to employ disreputable individuals. According to one observer, the old women

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[15] Directly after the war the State Penitentiary was a great burden on Mississippi, with many prisoners and little money to even feed them. Colonel Richardson went to the Military Governor and asked to lease the convicts for three years, paying $18,000 per year for their labor. In 1871, the Governor induced him to continue leasing the prisoners for another year. In addition to using this system to grow cotton, Colonel Richardson also used convict labor to rebuild levees that were broken and washed away during the Civil War. GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 668; Edythe W. McCraw, *A Mississippian Was the World's Greatest Cotton-Grower*, Sept. 1967, at 12 (Edmund Richardson Subject File, Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History).

[16] The leasing system was outlawed in by the legislature in 1872, and the state started construction of prison farms. That was so uneconomical that in 1875, the last year of Republican rule, the legislature gave up and permitted the leasing of county convicts to outside contractors. By the 1880s, the convict labor system was at its peak, and the death rate of convicts was 16%. The convict leasing system was finally abolished in 1908. DANIEL A. NOVAK, THE WHEEL OF SERVITUDE 20-25, 31-30 (1978); *Governor's Message*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Jan. 17, 1908; McCraw, *supra* note 15, at 13.

[17] In 1875, Colonel Richardson owned 174 shares of stock, Captain Oliver 65 shares, and J.W. Robinson 10 shares. From this point Colonel Richardson always held a majority of the stock. *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14.

[18] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 666, 668; *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14; McCraw, *supra* note 15, at 12

were often heard to say "The Captain has been mighty good to me; when we came here and had nothing, the children soon got work in the mill and we got credit at the store until we could pay up."[20]

Colonel Richardson and Captain Oliver made plans to rebuild the recently destroyed mill on a much larger scale. A total of five new buildings were erected, all carefully designed to prevent rapid burning—the brick buildings were built on the slow-burning mill-construction principle. The floors were built with plank and timber, with a layer of asbestos, and the columns were round instead of the typical square. The mill buildings were protected from fire by a sprinkler system running throughout and a large fire pump in an adjacent building.[21]

The same year the original mill burned down, the new building, later known as Mill 1, was erected on the same site and expanded. This first mill was 350 feet long and 50 feet wide and was three stories high. Carding was done on the first floor, and spinning rooms were located on the second and third floors. Next to Mill 1 there were dye houses, among other departments, and their overflow was emptied into a nearby ravine, which eventually made its way down to into a brook of water appropriately known as "dye branch."[22]

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[19] Colonel Richardson was the owner of numerous oil mills in Vicksburg, the President of the Atlanta World Exposition in 1883, and the head of the May Cotton Commission House, said to be the largest in the United States. GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 668-69; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 22.

[20] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 533-34, 675; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 22; West, *supra* note 11.

[21] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 22; Report on Mississippi Mills (Nov. 2, 1895), *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 2, at 82-91.

[22] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 22; Nancy Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, DAILY LEADER (Brookhaven, MS), Oct. 3, 1979; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; J.S. Rea, Sanborn Map of Wesson, Miss. (May 1889). An 1895 audit report recognized that the brook ran for some distance through the property, preventing immediate liability to law-suits on account of contamination in "dye branch." Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21.

Mill 2 was built in 1875 and 1876 and was 212 feet long, 50 feet wide, and four-stories high. Mill 2 had weaving on the first floor, carding on the second, spinning on the third, and spooling on the fourth. One end of this mill had an eight-story high tower, with a 110,000 gallon cistern used to supply the sprinkler system.[23]

Mill 3 was constructed in 1889 and 1890. Mill 3 was 240 feet long and 50 feet wide and five-stories high. Mill 3 had finishing on the first floor,[24] warping and beaming on the second, carding on the third, spinning on the fourth, and spooling on the fifth. A large one-story weave shed, built next to Mill 3, was 340 feet long and 175 feet wide, with a serrated or saw-tooth glass roof to provide light for the operators of the looms and a basement for storing raw materials and waste. Other buildings near the mills included lumber sheds, a machine shop, a soap factory, and a carpenter shop.[25]

In 1882 the Mississippi Legislature passed a law which permitted factories to run tax-free for a ten-year period after being built.[26] This law greatly favored the mills, and at the peak of mill activity around 1889 and 1890, the Mills were "the largest manufacturing institution south of the Ohio River," covering six acres of ground. Most of the raw cotton consumed was purchased directly from the local farmers, but wool was purchased from nearby Texas.[27] The amount of raw cotton and wool used by the mills was at its peak in 1890, when Mill 3 began to operate. In 1890 there were 30,000 cotton

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[23] Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Sanborn Map of Wesson, *supra* note 22.
[24] The finishing department handled the products produced by the spindles and looms. Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21.
[25] Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Sanborn Map of Wesson, *supra* note 22.
[26] Mississippi's law declared that machinery and everything else in a new factory "be exempt from all taxation, State, county, and municipal, for a period of ten years from the time such factory is completed and in operation." WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 60; Carolee T. Smith, Wesson, Mississippi Since 1838 (1938) (Wesson History Subject File, Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History).
[27] In 1875, Captain Oliver sent Archy Fairly to Texas to buy wool and sell products made by the mills, and he kept a dairy of his daily travels. Archy Fairly Diary (1875) (Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History).

spindles, 30 complete sets of woolen machinery, and 800 looms, with the latter to be increased to 1,200 by the end of the year.[28]

The mills operated entirely by steam power, obtaining water from a nearby pond that was pumped out of the pond and used over and over again, and used wood as fuel, consuming about fifty cords daily.[29] The local timber provided an abundant supply of fuel and the wood cost about $2 per cord, which was cheaper than coal. The success of the business demonstrated that, indeed, "cotton can be more economically manufactured in the immediate vicinity of its production than elsewhere."[30]

The mills produced cashmeres, jeans, deerskins, tweeds, flannels, wool-knitting yarn, gingham, plaids, checks, shirting, sewing threads, and many other products, including convict stripes. One manufacturing tycoon from England said that the machinery and finish of the fabrics was nearly a century in advance of the English manufacturing methods. In 1876 the Mississippi Mills won first prize the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the Atlanta Exposition for two of their exhibits of cotton goods. For ten years the mills were extraordinarily productive, yielding fabric so fine that the cotton became known as "Mississippi silk."[31]

Due to the mills' wide variety of products and their "reputation for excellence that [was] not surpassed by the product of any Mills in the world," trade for Wesson's goods was drawn from almost every state and they also had a large local patronage. The

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[28] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 677; WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 60; *A Thriving Town*, *supra* note 14; Williams & Little, supra note 14; Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Smith, *supra* note 26; Archy Fairly Diary, *supra* note 27.

[29] For a general overview of the power used to operate mills at the time and the relative value of coal and wood, see D. A. TOMKINS, COTTON MILL, COMMERCIAL FEATURES (1899).

[30] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 202-03; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 23; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21.

railroad owned a switch and a spur ran off from the main line to the front of the storehouse and the main entrance to the mills, making it much easier to receive and ship the freight. By 1878, there was such a demand for their products that the mills could barely keep up with the orders for styles. One of Mississippi's senators, while visiting Wyoming, found the Governor wearing clothes made from materials produced at the Wesson mills.[32]

In the 1870s and 1880s, Wesson's growth and prosperity centered around the mills and their phenomenal growth and it became the largest town on the railroad between Jackson and New Orleans. People came from everywhere to see the mills; Henry Ford sent an inspection group, President William McKinley came to visit, and even foreign manufacturers were often seen in Wesson. By 1880, the mills had electric lights, a luxury that the large Northern cities did not even have yet. The lights were a huge attraction, and passengers on the railroad would nearly topple trains coming through Wesson as they rushed to one side of the train to get a glimpse of the "light in a bottle."[33]

B. The Mill Workers

The Mississippi Mills owed much of their success in competing with Northern industry to the business skills and financial backing of Colonel Richardson, but equally important was Captain Oliver's ability to organize a work force. Most cotton entrepreneurs argued that the quality of white labor was not intelligent enough to locate mills in the South. The antebellum economy's dependence on cotton and slave labor

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[31] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 25, 32; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Smith, *supra* note 26. For a discussion of some of the events at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, see ERIC FONER, RECONSTRUCTION: AMERICA'S UNFINISHED REVOLUTION, 1863-1877, at 564-65.

[32] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 202-03; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 25; Smith, *supra* note 26; Williams & Little, supra note 14; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

meant that few Southerners were familiar with industrial work. The technologically advanced equipment brought into the mills from the North contrasted with the Southern management and labor resources.[34]

Although modern machinery enabled Southern manufacturers to employ unskilled and cheap labor, it placed new responsibilities on management and technical training was not available in Southern schools or in Southern mills. As a result, some of the original management employees at the Mississippi Mills, including the superintendent, John Hopkinson, came from English textile mills. These experienced managers could not fill all of the management positions, so they quickly trained native southerners to be placed in positions of authority. The only foreign labor ever hired to work in the mills under Captain Oliver's management were those workers who were with the mill since they started.[35]

Historians generally agree that the ample supply of cheap labor gave the South its most important advantage over the North. The Mississippi Mills provided steady employment for the continuous influx of people coming into Wesson from the surrounding county and adjoining counties as more work opened up to them. Some came to Wesson seeking the wages of the mills because the war had left them destitute on their farms, others came because that same war left them widowed or disabled. A large proportion of the mill workers were women and children. When the Mississippi Mills were incorporated in 1871, there were 300 employees. At the completion of Mill 3 in early 1890, the mills employed about 1,200 employees. By October of 1890, 2,000

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[33] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 21, 25, 32; Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; Williams & Little, supra note 14.
[34] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 668; HALL, *supra* note 2, at 51.

people were employed in the mills, and the addition of new machinery was supposed to increase the workforce.[36]

The Mississippi Mills ran longer hours, employed more children, and paid lower wages than their northern competitors. The workers in Wesson averaged sixty-six hours a week, while workers in the North averaged around sixty. The mills at their busiest had to operate at night, using extra shifts, and by 1880, the plant was running twenty-four hours a day, six days a week.[37] While the workers below the age of sixteen in the Mississippi Mills remained between thirty to seventy percent until past the turn of the century, the number in New England factories declined from over fourteen percent in 1880 to under seven percent in the 1890s.[38]

Unskilled male workers and the availability of women and children after the Civil War led the Mississippi Mills to adopt a labor system similar to those used in the early days of the textile industry. Northern manufacturers developed two different strategies for securing a labor force in the early nineteenth century. The first system was the Rhode Island or family labor system where, rather than hiring individual workers, mill owners purchased family labor as a package. This attracted a core of mature adult workers who were paid less than a living wage and offered employment to large numbers of young children, even cheaper labor, who could perform simple tasks. The second system was

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[35] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 668; HALL, *supra* note 2, at 51; Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi*, *supra* note 3, at 55.

[36] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 676-77; PATRICK J. HEARDEN, INDEPENDENCE & EMPIRE, THE NEW SOUTH'S COTTON MILL CAMPAIGN, 1865-1901, at 47 (1982); WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 12; James Featherston, *Wesson is Copiah County's Comeback Town*, CLARION-LEDGER (Jackson, MS), Oct. 9, 1955; Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; *Wesson, As Its Citizens Have Known It*, THE BAPTIST RECORD, Jan. 20, 1938; Williams & Little, supra note 14; Smith, *supra* note 26.

[37] Permission from the Insurance Company had to be secured for operating at night; for example, the mills had to pay $14.49 to run Mill 1 all night from November 23, 1889 to January 23, 1890. Williams & Little, supra note 14.

the Lowell or boardinghouse system, attracting a work force of farmers' daughters from the surrounding New England countryside who would reside in company erected boardinghouses while working a few years before marriage. This attracted a work force of young, single women, more than eighty percent between the ages of fifteen and thirty years old; children were a small and insignificant part of the Lowell mills. Southern mill owners experimented with boardinghouses for single girls, but most soon settled with the family labor system.[39]

The Mississippi Mills, however, opted for a combination of the two systems, with a few adjustments, that resulted in a work force composed of two distinct groups of workers—young girls and mill families. Adopting the boardinghouse system of recruiting workers from the surrounding countryside, the Mississippi Mills recruited young girls from the nearby counties. The farmers in surrounding Lawrence County and the neighboring counties were very poor, but had large families with as many as ten or twelve children that helped them work on the farms. The mill would go to Lawrence County, find a poor farmer with a large family, and offer employment to some of his children. The older single daughters might also come to Wesson to work in the mills and stay with family members[40] or in boarding houses as in Lowell.[41]

What distinguished the Mississippi Mills' recruiting efforts from the Lowell system was that children were a significant part of their recruiting efforts. The Wesson

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[38] HEARDEN, *supra* note 36, at 47-48; Nancy Hamilton, *Wesson was incorporated during the Civil War*, DAILY LEADER (Brookhaven, MS), June 16, 1989, at 3; Williams & Little, supra note 14; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Earl Stringer (July 8, 1994).

[39] THOMAS DUBLIN, WOMEN AT WORK: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WORK AND COMMUNITY IN LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS, 1826-1860, at 17-18, 23-57 (1979); HALL, *supra* note 2, at 51-52, 398 n.18.

[40] There were accounts of nieces and nephews coming into Wesson to stay with their aunts and uncles, and accounts of grandmothers bringing granddaughters to come to Wesson to work in the mills. Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001).

mills wanted the younger daughters because they had small hands and could easily handle thread and thread the looms. The mills would promise to provide the farmers' children with employment and an education, and would send their parents some of the money that each child earned, holding the rest in escrow for the child. These children were also boarded in Wesson, though not in boardinghouses. The mills would pay mill families to take care of the children, to educate them, and raise the children as and with their own. The children worked from 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m., six days a week. During the typical day, the mill whistle rang every morning at 4:00 a.m. to wake everyone up. There was a lunch break from 12:00 until 1:00, and then work continued until 6:00 at night. After work, the children would come home, do their household chores, and eat dinner. After dinner, the members of the boarding families, who were educated at the public and private schools, would teach the children for two to three hours in the evening.[42]

In addition to hiring individual workers, the mill owners also used the family labor system of purchasing family labor as a package, paying the adult workers less than a living wage and offering employment to either their children, the children that boarded with them, or both. The husband in the mill family would always work, but depending on their economic status, their wives and children might not have had to work. If the mill family was upper middle class or upper class, then the wife might stay home and their children would likely attend a private school, while the boarding child was taught at night. If the mill family was middle class, their children might have gone to the public

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[41] Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Wilmer F. Williams (July 8, 1994); Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22.
[42] Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Wilmer F. Williams (July 8, 1994); Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22.

schools while they taught the boarding children at night. If the family was lower middle class, it is likely that the entire family worked and that they taught both their own children and the boarding children at night.[43]

The Wesson boarding-family system of recruiting child labor from the countryside was a solution to the problem of recruiting inexpensive labor and enabled the mill owners to socialize and control the majority of its labor force. The Mississippi Mills adopted a labor system that South Carolina textile entrepreneur William Gregg, founder of the Graniteville cotton mill, had only hoped to accomplish. Gregg believed that the "large class of miserable poor white people among us . . . might be induced to place their children in a situation in which they could be educated and reared in industrious habits." His rational was that children made up a large portion of the labor surplus in the countryside, the lure of wages could induce poor farmers to send their children to work in the mills, and the children who grew up in the mills would become efficient, dependable workers. Although young girls failed to show up in Graniteville in large numbers, they came out in droves to Wesson. The children that came to Wesson received twelve cents a day, which was much cheaper than the wages paid adults, and this inexpensive labor was crucial to the growth and profit margins of the Mississippi Mills and to their own families' survival. Both young girls and young boys began working in the mills as young as ages seven and eight, and they could easily perform menial jobs and the low-skill job of spinning, even if they could do nothing else. The children grew up working in the

[43] Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

mills, they learned the ins and outs of the textile trade, and the majority of them would continue to work in the mills as adults and never move back to the farm.[44]

Reliance on the boarding-family system meant that the Mississippi Mills' growth, productivity, and advantage over the North was based to a large extent on child labor, and critics of child labor were not hard to find. This was a system of labor that harkened back to the antebellum mill at Bankston and held a striking resemblance to the leasing of slave labor at low overhead cost for the simpler operations. Without the ability to use slave labor, the mills simply turned to child labor. In the 1880s and 1890s, however, the opposition to child labor was not focused on the morality of the practice or the health and welfare of children, as might be expected. Especially considering events such as the following published in the September 6, 1989 issue of the *Wesson Enterprise*: "James Davis, a small boy, while cleaning off a card Tuesday was badly bruised by the belt catching his arm." Instead, the Knights of Labor led the opposition, complaining that the low wages paid to children held down the earnings of adults.[45]

The Wesson order of the Knights was organized from employees of the Mississippi Mills in mid-1886, but there was quite a struggle between the Knights and management and their minor efforts were quickly smothered. Although Captain Oliver viewed the Knights as more of a fraternal organization than a labor union, he moved first by immediately instituting a discharge policy and discharged members of the order. The assembly's Master Workman attempted to explain to Captain Oliver that the members had made no demands, but had taken the position that "the Knights of Labor were an honorable society . . . that they would much rather build the Mississippi Mills up than do

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[44] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 56-57; Smith, *supra* note 26; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001).

anything against their interests." Captain Oliver was not convinced and told the Master Workman that "he would break up the order in Wesson if he had to discharge every Knight of Labor in the mills and if it was necessary he would close the mills for 12 months." The local appealed to Terence V. Powderly, a national leader of the Knights, who advised them not to resist and to continue organizing in secret. Powderly also noted that if members were being discharged "you had better send back your charter and give up the order at once for it will come to that in the end." Heeding Captain Oliver's warning and taking Powderly's advice, no strike occurred. In an effort to quell any secret organizing, Captain Oliver proceeded to fire all employees suspected of having any connections with the Knights and persuaded other businessmen in town to refuse to employ them. Faced with Oliver's actions and an unsympathetic national leadership, the assembly in Wesson collapsed by 1988. Knights in Alabama, primarily artisans, miners, and iron workers, boycotted the Mississippi Mills, but to no avail. After this event with the Knights of Labor, there would be no more labor problems while the mills remained under Captain Oliver's management.[46]

Although reliance on child labor encouraged exploitation of the young and reduced the number of jobs available and the wages paid to adults, there were advantages to the use of child labor that extended beyond the mill owners' pockets. Following the Civil War, Mississippi was impoverished, there were a large number of people left destitute and living in the surrounding countryside. Farmers realized that in addition to food, shelter, and clothing, their children would have the benefits of "town life" in

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[45] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 57; Weaver, *Doings in the Mills*, WESSON MIRROR, Sept. 6, 1989.
[46] JOHATHAN GARLOCK, GUIDE TO THE LOCAL ASSEMBLIES OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR (1982); MELTON ALONZA MCLAURIN, PATERNALISM AND PROTEST: SOUTHERN COTTON MILL WORKERS AND ORGANIZED

Wesson, including church and educational opportunities. There were no schools in the rural communities, and working in the mills would provide children with practical training during the day and home schooling in the evenings. Furthermore, the mills did not operate on Sunday and all of the workers, including the children, went to church. This meant that the children in Wesson were able to attend church and Sunday school once a week, whereas the rural parts of Mississippi were fortunate to have a preacher visit once a month. The farmers' daughters also had the opportunity to come to a larger town, meet someone while working at the mills, fall in love, and marry someone "above them." It was clear that mill employment did not disqualify these young girls from marriage, indeed, the *Wesson Enterprise* frequently published local news in the mills such as "Three of the factory girls married. Best wishes."[47]

The poverty engulfing the countryside following the Civil War struck widows and their children particularly hard. As one contemporary noted about the Mississippi Mills' labor system, "One of the blessings of this great enterprise is its benevolence in supplying employment for women and children that would be almost helpless without some work of this kind." Sallie Pearson was one woman who worked at the mills as a child and as a widow. She began working in the mills in 1885, when she came to Wesson at the age of thirteen. Although she was married in 1892, her husband died shortly thereafter, leaving her to raise their child. She then went back to working in the mills until she met her second husband and remarried. Widows and their older children could come to Wesson, begin working at the mills, receive food and supplies from the local stores on credit, and then settle their accounts as their paychecks began to come in. Widows who had neither

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LABOR, 1875-1905, at 112-113 (1971); MELTON ALONZA MCLAURIN, THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR IN THE SOUTH 69 (1978); Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001).

relatives nor older children were able to bring their baby to work with them every day in the mills. It was also not uncommon for women to have to bring their toddlers to the mills. One such woman would dress her young boy in a skirt with bloomers and place her chair on the skirt while working at the loom.[48]

Child labor was not unique to the South—both the Southern and the Northern textile industry relied mainly on the labor of women and children. But the extent of child workers in the Mississippi Mills' and their method of recruiting children may be the most unique feature of their labor system. These young people provided a steady and seemingly endless supply of cheap labor that was a critical part of the Mississippi Mills' growth and ability to compete with the North in the quality and quantity of their products. Considering the advantages of child labor, and their ability to get the work done less expensively, it seemed a logical choice for the mill owners. From the prospective of profit and production, the next logical choice would seemingly be the employment of black workers. That is what makes Mississippi Mills' exclusion of black workers from all but the most "menial jobs" most striking.[49]

Although this exclusion is striking, it is not surprising considering their origin with Colonel Wesson and the fact that most Southern mills excluded blacks from "production jobs," such as spinning and weaving. After the Civil War, the textile world became a white domain. This segregation was primarily accomplished informally, but South Carolina even when so far as to eventually write this unspoken pact into law.

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[47] Weaver, *Doings in the Mills*, WESSON MIRROR, Sept. 6, 1989; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).
[48] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 60-61; GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 676; *The Press on the Death of Captain Oliver*, WESSON MIRROR, July 18, 1891; Interview with David Higgs (Mar. 10, 2001); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001).
[49] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 66; Interview with David Higgs (Mar. 10, 2001); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Hazel Morton (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Clifton White (Aug. 20, 1994).

Many factors contributed to this exclusion—the notion that mills provided salvation to poor whites, the taboo against bringing black men into contact with white women, and the desire to keep blacks tied to agricultural labor. Captain Oliver followed Colonel Wesson's example of employing primarily white workers. One citizen of Wesson gave the following explanation for the few black workers employed with the Mississippi Mills: "The deep South was still feeling the remnants of Reconstruction. Things were tight and money was hard to come by. Who do you think was going to be employed first? Are you going to give the job to this black man because you feel sorry for him or are you going to give it to your cousin who needed to raise his children?"[50]

Although the Mississippi Mills were predominately white, there were a few black male workers. These black workers were in competition with other menial workers, and if they were employed in the mills it was to do work that white workers did not want to do. They performed only low-paying menial tasks, such as emptying the dye vats into the ravine, moving bales of cotton, loading materials and finished goods, working with lumber and fuel, maintenance work, and other general work back in the "yard" behind the mills. It is likely that the duties of black workers in the Mississippi Mills compared to work done by blacks in other southern mills. In many mills, the dirtiest and heaviest work went to black men; they worked in the yard and also in the opening and picker rooms. A President of one of the Danville mills explained their policy: "As regards colored people, we only employ them as sweepers, scourers, truck drivers, and in the dye

[50] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 66; Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi*, *supra* note 3, at 58-59; Interview with Hank Smith, Mar. 15, 2001.

house and picker rooms: we do not have them in the mills proper, except in the above mentioned menial capacities."[51]

There was at least one exception to the general rule, a brick mason named Jules Alcee LaBranche. LaBranche moved from New Orleans to Wesson with his family and a white man named W. T. Wooden, who was superintendent of the mills. LaBranche did all the bricklaying for the mills, with his crew composed of black workers, and kept the mills' boilers in repair. He also laid the foundation for many of the houses in Wesson, built a hotel and a church in nearby Brookhaven, helped build the white school building in Wesson, and taught several white men the masonry trade.[52]

While black women were completely excluded from employment in the mills, white women composed the vast majority of the workforce. There were numerous motives for the preference of young women, including the need for small hands as mentioned above. At least one other motive was driven by profit—women's wages were about sixty percent of men's. These young female recruits mostly worked in the spinning operations, which was a fairly low-skill task. Even though weavers required more training, the weaving room also maintained quite a demand for these girls.[53]

A hierarchy of sex and age existed in various departments at the mills, including spinning, weaving, warping, carding, sample, dye, and finishing. Children of both sexes were at the bottom, given the lowest-paying and most unskilled and routine tasks. Many small children were in charge of bringing supplies into the weaving room and filling the

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[51] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 66-67; Interview with David Higgs (Mar. 10, 2001); Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Hazel Morton (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Hank Smith, Mar. 15, 2001; Interview by David Higgs with Clifton White (Aug. 20, 1994).
[52] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 25; Letter from Rutha LaBranche Dillon and Bertha LeBranche Johnson (Wesson Prominent Persons Subject File, Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History); Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001).
[53] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 67-69.

baskets with the supplies that the women were supposed to use. Some children would assist their fathers or uncles in bringing packages off the train and delivering them by wagon to the mills. Other children were employed as sweepers of various mill departments. Entry level jobs in the card room, sweeping and cleaning the dust from around the machines, were reserved for boys; these jobs served as apprenticeships for carding room's better–paying job positions.[54]

Age-old notions that women are patient, neat, and careful, with small hands and nimble fingers, placed them in positions working with fast moving repetitive machines in weaving and spinning rooms and sewing clothes after the fabric was made in the sewing room. Weavers were primarily women who possessed more skill than spinners, a quick touch in tying broken warp threads, and an ability to watch over a number of machines. It also helped to be tall in the weave room, rather than climb up on the loom. Spinning and sewing rooms were purely female rooms because no men wanted to do spinning or sewing.[55]

Men, accustomed to working in the fields and heading farms, had a monopoly on machine-fixing, supervisory, management, office, and "heavy" jobs. Loom fixers in the weave room were always men. The men also served as watchmen at the mill, there were three night watchmen and one day watchmen. There were five men working as printers, who were kept busy with job work turning out tags, bills of lading, and stationary. Carding became a "man's job" because of the physical strength required and its reputation as a more "dangerous" job. The men also kept the supplies going, such as

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[54] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 66-69; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001); David Higgs Interview with Earl Stringer (July 8, 1994).
[55] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 66-69; Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001).

bringing the cotton in the wagon off the train, dying the cotton in the dye shed, and carrying it into the weaving room.[56]

The sexual division in the cotton mills was grounded in part by the family-boarding system. There were husbands, wives, and children that moved from neighboring counties to work in the mills, and each had their "proper" role. The husband was the breadwinner, the wife did more domestic work, the child assisted, and each member of the family was dependant on the wages of the others. Jobs performed by adult white men were highest, followed by white women. Blacks earned slightly more than children. The wages ranged from fifty to ninety cents a day for white adults, and less for blacks and children, making around twenty-five cents for working an eleven hour day.[57]

Despite the low wages and long hours that characterized the textile industry, the prospect of cash wages lured people to the Mississippi Mills from the farms. In 1891, there were around 2,000 workers in the mills and the weekly payroll ran from $18,000 to $25,000. Considering the fact that people from rural Mississippi were impoverished on their farms, the mill workers were well paid. Additionally, compared to other factories in the South and farm labor, the working conditions were good at the mills. They owed their employment at the mills to Captain Oliver, and were indebted to him for taking

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[56] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 66-69; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001); Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001); Sanborn Map of Wesson, *supra* note 22.

[57] HALL, *supra* note 2, at 78; Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; Hamilton, *Wesson was incorporated during the Civil War*, *supra* note 38; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Clifton White (Aug. 20, 1994); Interview by David Higgs with H. B. McNeil (July 25, 1994).

them away from the farms and making them part of a mill society. On July 3, 1890, the workers of the mills presented him with a gold-headed cane, in token of their devotion.[58]

In 1891, the Mississippi Mills were described as a "great industry, affording employment through which thousands of citizens of a state are made brighter, happier, and better." The some 2000 workers were "happy and contented, free from labor organization, free from trade's-union dictation" and formed an "honest little army of workers" who have "for nearly a quarter of a century received their liberal pay without the cessation of a day." The workers were doing better in Wesson than they could do elsewhere and, for the most part, they were healthy and happy.[59]

C. The Wesson Mill Village

Wesson was more than the mill and its workers. It became Mississippi's first large mill village and was similar to the South's first mill town established in Graniteville. The 163 village houses were alike, most of them were one-story wood duplexes built to accommodate two families, with two front doors and typically three rooms on each side—two bedrooms and a kitchen, with a wood stove. These duplex houses were rented to the mill employees for $1.50 per month—$1 for the rooms plus fifty cents for the fireplace. The front yard of each duplex had a flower garden, and there was enough land behind the house to raise a vegetable garden and keep a cow, pig, and a few chickens. This provided each family with butter, milk, eggs, and meat, and they

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[58] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 534; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 32; Smith, *supra* note 26; West, *supra* note 11; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).
[59] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 675.

obtained water from a nearby water well. In addition to the duplex housing, there were eleven larger residence houses, mostly occupied by the mill officers.[60]

After the mills were sold to Colonel Richardson and Captain Oliver and mills began to prosper, the town of Wesson developed as well. The commissary was discontinued and independent stores began to open up around town. The banking business of the town was transacted through the Cotton Mill Office. The J. S. Rea Insurance Agency of Wesson was created in 1881 and insured most of the town, the residences, and the mills. Candy factories, a livery stable, an ice house, and a blacksmith shop were established. Wesson also had three newspapers during this time, the *Wesson Herald*, *Copiah Signal*, and *Wesson Mirror*.[61]

To accommodate the mill traffic, the Richardson House was built as early as 1864 and located to serve passengers arriving and departing on the railroad. It was a two-story hotel, with twenty-eight rooms available for guests, and a large room at the top that was used as a plush gambling casino. The Richardson House was widely known for excellent meals and comfortable rooms, and it also served as the headquarters for political rallies. Most of the people staying at the hotel were the "drummers" or traveling salesman who came to Wesson to supply the mill commissary and later the merchants of the local establishments. The drummers would unpack their trunks and hang their goods in the first-floor sampling room. There were also at least thirteen boarding and rooming houses

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[60] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 25; *Wesson, As Its Citizens Have Known It*, *supra* note 41; Bob Bloodworth, *Spotlight on Wesson: Where the "Milk Is Also Meat and Bread,"* JACKSON DAILY NEWS, May 22, 1949; Hamilton, *Wesson was incorporated during the Civil War*, *supra* note 38; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11; Strickland, *supra* note 1, at 20-21; Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001); Interview with Caroline Graham (Mar. 16, 2001).

[61] Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

including the Latting House, Union Boarding House, Blue Front, Palmer House, Smiley House, Hotel Home, and Palace Hotel.[62]

Due to the mills buying wool and cotton in great quantities, the town became a well-known cotton market and farmers from nearby and far away counties brought their cotton to Wesson to sell. People would come in the fall with their families, bringing everything that could be produced on a farm for sale at the market. The mill workers would wave out the windows of the mills as people would pass by on their way to market in their one-horse wagons. At times, the streets would become so crowded with ox teams and wagons that residents could not even drive a buggy down the main street.[63]

As Wesson grew, so did the recreational activity and opportunities. Mill workers and towns people played basketball, baseball, and football—introduced by a mill foreman forming a rugby team. There was also a tennis court under the loom room of the mill. Clubs and fraternal organizations were developed early in Wesson—for example, the J. M. Wesson Lodge 317 of the Masons was established in 1869. The Lodge activity, however, was not always the most wholesome—for example, the Lodge minutes around 1878 show that several members were suspended, one for open drunkenness and several for "unmasonic conduct."[64]

There was also activity with a more cultured flare. An opera house was built, where traveling players presented popular melodramas, and the Ringling Brothers, Barnum, and Bailey Circus visited regularly. For entertainment, there were also silent

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[62] Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Wesson Hotel/Richardson House; Wesson Hotel Statement of Significance (Richardson House Subject File, Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History); Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21.
[63] Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; Interview by David Higgs with H. B. McNeil (July 25, 1994).
[64] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 45, 47; Interview with Caroline Graham (Mar. 16, 2001); History of Wesson.

movies, medicine shows, minstrel acts, balloon ascensions, and carnivals. On Sunday, all of the local residents would congregate in the Park in the front of the mills in their Sunday best, to socialize. Couples who were courting would frequently meet in the park, and could also be seen riding around town in a horse and buggy rented from the livery stable.[65]

During the era of the mills, spiritual development was also a primary focus of the people of Wesson. Wesson had as many as seven churches at one time: the Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Episcopalian, Last Chance Church, and African-American Methodist Episcopal, even though there were few blacks living within the town of Wesson. The churches would frequently hold large evangelistic meetings in Wesson in tents. The focus on Church activity was due in large part to the influence of Captain Oliver, a devout Presbyterian, said to have been "equally at home in managing a factory or conducting a prayer-meeting."[66]

As a direct result of his strict religious beliefs, Captain Oliver was a teetotaler who, like Colonel Wesson, strongly believed that alcohol was not conducive to a healthy environment for the citizens and mill workers of Wesson. The mill owned 3,280 acres of land in Copiah and Lincoln Counties, and nearly all the real estate in and around Wesson. Whenever a piece of land was sold in Wesson, Captain Oliver had a clause written into the deeds that if alcoholic beverages were ever sold on the premises illegally, the title would revert back to the grantors. Captain Oliver also had the State legislature change

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[65] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 44-45; Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).
[66] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 534; West, *supra* note 11; Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001); History of Wesson.

the south boundary of Copiah County by dropping it down one mile square so that the entire town of Wesson was located in Copiah County—dry territory.[67]

The prevalent church activity indicated that the mill workers and towns people held definite standards for decent living, and they also held an ambition that their children should have opportunities that they were denied due to conditions accompanying and following the Civil War. Indeed, many people who moved to Wesson and even those who stayed on the farm but sent their children to work in the mills, did so, at least in part, to educate their children. Wesson took great pride in its schools and even made an effort to secure the location for the Mississippi Female College to assist in the education of the 1,400 young women in Wesson drawn from the neighboring counties by the prospect of employment at the mills. Wesson raised $10,000 and the site for the women's college, which ultimately went to Columbus instead.[68]

Both private schools and a public school taught the children during the mill era. There were many private schools, including the schools of Mrs. Mary Gertrued Hamilton Long and Miss Minnie Collier, but the private schools did not provide education for everyone. The first public school in Wesson was a two-frame schoolhouse built in 1875, which relocated as the population grew. By 1888, work was started on a new two-story brick school building and the first session in the building was in September 1889, seating 1000 students and running 10 months a year. On December 18, 1890, the building

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[67] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 203; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 43; Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001). There is some debate as to whether it was Colonel Wesson, as opposed to Captain Oliver, who had Wesson removed from Lincoln County and placed entirely in Copiah County, not only because the latter was dry, but also because Wesson was not fond of the name "Lincoln" after the Civil War. Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

[68] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 203; *A Thriving Town*, *supra* note 14; Burlian Walker, *Wesson*, ROADWAYS (Feb. 1974); *Wesson, As Its Citizens Have Known It*, *supra* note 41; Interview by David Higgs with Earl Stringer (July 8, 1994).

burned. A new building was completed in time for the 1891-92 school year, and when it opened there were eleven grades. By 1900, Wesson High School would rank second best in Mississippi in accreditation, with only Meridian's public school ahead.[69]

When the Mississippi Mills were running full tilt and Wesson had a population of four to five thousand, there were five graduates in Wesson High School's first graduating class in 1893 and six graduates in the 1894 class—four girls and two boys. Why were there so few students in these graduating classes? These graduates were from the leading families in Wesson and the children of mill worker families that attended the public school did not graduate, but went to work in the mills. Recognizing the "necessity as well as the justice of promoting the educational interest of the young people of Wesson, who cannot, on account of their employment, attend the regular session of the public school," summer night school was instituted that taught children over fourteen who worked in the mills. The children under fourteen who worked in the mills would receive tutoring at night after work, either by private school teachers, parents, or boarding families.[70]

In 1889, the *Wesson Mirror* boasted that the "schools and churches in the town are an emblem of morality and prosperity," but in the nearby lumber town of Beauregard there was a different story to tell. It was said that Beauregard fit the qualifications for Hell possibly better than any other town in Mississippi. That reputation developed primarily from its seven saloons lined up along the railroad tracks that were so large and busy that visitors from Jackson, Vicksburg, and even New Orleans were impressed. In

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[69] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 203; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 55; *A Thriving Town*, *supra* note 14; Walker, *supra* note 68; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; History of Wesson.

addition to drinking, gambling, and prostitution, lawlessness was rampant in Beauregard—there was constant fighting and people were frequently killed.[71]

Even considering this rough life, these saloons flourished during the 1870s and 1880s when the Wesson mills were prospering and running around the clock. Beauregard became a playground for Wesson residents and a boardwalk was even built from Wesson to Bearegard along the railroad track so that the "good" people of Wesson could go visit for a while and then come back home. On the days when the workers at the Mississippi Mills got their wages, Beauregard's saloons were so crowded and people were so rowdy that people stayed off the streets entirely.[72]

Beauregard was the kind of place that preachers would compare with Sodom and Gomorrah, and many of them would come to preach there constantly, claiming that it would be destroyed because of its wickedness. It is said that on Saturday, April 21, 1883, one such traveling preacher, with a gray beard, his robe, and his bible, came to Beauregard and preached to several hundred people on the train depot that "God will not allow a place as sinful as this to continue." Early the next Sunday morning, a tornado hit that flattened the saloons and basically destroyed the entire town of Beauregard, also doing much damage in Wesson. After the tornado, the Wesson Chapter of the Red Cross

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[70] GRAHAM R. HODGES, "OLD WESSON" 1864-1948: MEMORIES OF THIRTY PEOPLE ABOUT WESSON, MISSISSIPPI AND NEARBY COMMUNITIES; Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Wesson Graded Public School 1893-94 Handbook; History of Wesson.

[71] *A Thriving Town*, *supra* note 14; *Wesson, As Its Citizens Have Known It*, *supra* note 41; Walker, *supra* note 68; Rowan Family Papers, Wesson Mississippi (Nov. 25 1865 to Feb. 20, 1899) (Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

[72] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 47; Rowan Family Papers, *supra* note 71; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

gave aid to 550 homeless families, many of whom then moved to Wesson, pushing Wesson's population to 5,000.[73]

Not all of these 5,000 people in Wesson could gain employment at the Mississippi Mills. White women and children could usually work in the mills. Many young girls began working in the mills when they were eight or ten years old, but when some of them became teenagers, their hands grew too big to run the spindles as efficiently as before and the mill would fire them. They were then forced to find employment elsewhere in Wesson, or go back to the farms. Having grown up in Wesson, however, the girls had received an education, been exposed to town life, and did not want to return to the country. Many of them married men working in the mills or were dating people in the mills, and they naturally stayed. Quite a few of the young girls that were thrown out of the mills, however, and the others who came to Wesson but were never offered employment at the mills, had nowhere to go and could not find work. Faced with no good prospects of employment, these young women turned to prostitution and worked in the boardinghouses, hotels, and brothels in Wesson. These establishments were available for the pleasure of people traveling in from out of town, looking at cloth, taking samples, and bringing it back to their plant or factory to make clothes. When there was still prostitution in Beauregard, the "nicer" and "prettier" girls were in Wesson. It was reported that eight out of ten girls learned the "second trade" while working in Wesson.[74]

Few, if any, black families seeking employment in and around Wesson actually lived within the town limits; they mainly lived on the outskirts of the white mill village,

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[73] Bloodworth, *supra* note 60; Featherston, *supra* note 41; Wesson Red Cross, The Terrible Cyclone of 1883 (July 11, 1883); Rowan Family Papers, *supra* note 71; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).
[74] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 53; Smith, *supra* note 26; Walker, *supra* note 68; Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001).

described as "purely a white man's town" and a "white enclave in a sea of blacks." Black women would sometimes find employment helping white families with their young children and performing daily domestic chores, such as ironing, but were never allowed to work in the mills. Even though black men were occasionally given mill work, their main options were the timber and farming industry, where they competed with white men for jobs. As the mills grew, the pine forests of the area had to be cut, milled, and made ready for houses. Saw mills were built locally, in neighboring towns like Beuregard, where over 200 white and black men were employed. Many people who lived near town also made their living farming, cutting, and hauling long yellow pine for fuel to the mills, where cords were stacked in the wood yard. Black workers, however, mainly worked on farms, doing share cropping or performing day labor, either raising cotton to sell to the mills or doing work for farmers, such as milking cows. A final option was to work on the New Orleans, St. Louis, and Chicago Railroad.[75]

Although there were job opportunities available outside the Mississippi Mills, the Wesson mill village had flourished, and a social environment developed outside the mills, the town of Wesson and its people remained economically dependent upon the productivity of the mills. The mill itself, as well as its some 2000 workers, depended to a great extent upon the management of Captain Oliver. Colonel Edmund Richardson died in 1886 and his second-eldest son, John P. Richardson, who had briefly served as superintendent of the mills, was elected President of the Mississippi Mills during the construction of Mill 3. He was married to Captain Oliver's daughter and ran the mills

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[75] Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi*, *supra* note 3, at 57 & n.2; Smith, *supra* note 26; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; WESSON ENTERPRISE, Sept. 29, 1905; Interview with David Higgs (Mar. 10, 2001); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview with Hazel Morton (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Clifton White (Aug. 20, 1994).

from their home in New Orleans. John Richardson's absence during this time, like his father's before him, had no real impact on the development and success of the mills. Captain Oliver, who owned a considerable amount of the mill property and possessed a large portion of the shares of the mills, continued in the position of Secretary and Treasurer and General Manager of the mills. The mills continued to prosper for a while, but before 1891, the mills sustained considerable reverses by reason of the great depreciation in woolen fabrics, of which the mill accumulated over $500,000 worth in stock. The real trouble began after Captain Oliver's death on July 3, 1891.[76]

IV. The Decline of the Mills: 1891-1906

The tragedy of Captain Oliver's death was a sign of things to come. Following his death, the mills began to decline by reason of changes in management, the Panic of 1893, feuding among shareholders, labor disputes, and various financial difficulties developing out of increasing production costs and a growing lack of funds. The plant suffered many reverses from the want of trained executive officers to handle the institution. The management of such a large plant required executive ability of a very high order, and no amount of ability without special training for the business would suffice. After Captain Oliver died, the owners were unable to employ anyone to carry on the business as productively and the mills suffered from frequent changes in management. The management of the mills first came under the control of John P. Richardson, who was President and principal stockholder. He had many and varied interests besides his interests in the mills, was still living with his wife in New Orleans, and it was impossible for him to give his time and attention to the mills. Before John

[76] GOODSPEED, *supra* note 11, at 673; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 33; *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14.

Richardson had learned much about the management of the mills, he died. By 1893, his older brother, James S. Richardson, was elected President of the mill and R. E. Williams became the Secretary and Treasurer.[77]

But James Richardson's time was also taken up with other interests, and the mill suffered as a consequence. The banking business of the town stopped being transacted through the Cotton Mill Office and the Bank of Wesson was established in January of 1893. Although the Mississippi Mills secured several blue ribbons for cloth that was displayed at the Worlds Fair in Chicago in early 1893, that same year they began to use shoddy for the first time since Colonel Wesson stopped using this poorly made fabric during the Civil War. The mills were partially closed in 1893 on account of a large surplus of textile products having accumulated.[78]

In addition to these production problems, the Panic of 1893 caused 600 banks, 15,000 commercial businesses, and 74 railroads nationwide to close. The depression in the South that was caused by the Panic was even more debilitating and long-lasting than in other parts of the country, and the percentage of business failures was much higher in the South during the depression years than the national average. This depression brought the distress that enveloped the surrounding countryside during the war and the years following, to the industrial towns of the South. Although existing cotton mills were better off than many other industries, factories in Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi shut down much of their machinery or closed entirely.[79]

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[77] *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14; Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi*, *supra* note 3; Smith, *supra* note 26; Mississippi Mills Stockholders: 1894, *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 2, at 112.

[78] *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14; Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21.

[79] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 33; WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 264.

Whatever problems the Mississippi Mills were experiencing with production due to changes in management and the depression, a payroll for the mill in 1893 illustrates the wages paid to the employees of the mill during that time faltered little, if any. The total weekly payroll for the mill in 1893 was approximately $3,750. The office boy, whose duties were listed as copying and indexing, was paid $15 per month. All of the supervisors were paid on a daily basis, the highest rate paid was to the assistant superintendent who received $5 per day, the next highest rate of $4.81 per day was paid to the overseers of the machine shop and carpentry shop. The hourly paid employees in the mill received not more than fifty cents a day.[80]

In 1894, James Richardson decided to build Mill 4, which was 114 feet long, 50 feet wide, and two stories high. This would be the final expansion of the Mississippi Mills. The same year it was constructed, cotton consumption dropped by a half and wool consumption dropped by three-quarters. The mill had on hand a large supply of yarn and began the operation of a rag-picker, which accounted for the small amount of cotton used that year, but this shows that the depression must have hit Wesson to some extent in 1894. Furthermore, by 1895, Wesson's population had dropped from 5,000 at the time of Captain Oliver's death to about 2,500 people, indicating that although the depression may not have decreased workers' wages, it likely reduced the number of mill workers.[81]

In November of 1895, the stockholders of the mills were almost entirely confined to the Richardson and Oliver families, and Mrs. John P. Richardson had an audit report performed on the Mississippi Mills, their property, and their current and future capacity. The mills were valued at $765,600 and the report noted that although the buildings and

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[80] Phillips, *A History of Wesson, Mississippi*, *supra* note 3, at 57 & n.2.

machines were in good repair, some of the machinery was old-fashioned. This outdated machinery slowed production rate, and, if renewed, it would bring great profit to the company. In 1895, Mississippi was the third largest cotton producing state and the auditor concluded that while the mill had suffered from frequent changes in management and superintendents, it was still valuable. There was no reason why, under suitable and proper management and with replaced machinery, it would not show more profits in the future.[82]

Soon after the audit report, the stockholders began fighting with each other over the affairs of the mills, including the management, ownership and sale of stock, and future production of the mills. In 1897, the Chancery Court of Copiah County issued President James S. Richardson's request for an injunction preventing Captain Oliver's only son, John M. Oliver, from interfering with the property, affairs, business, or employees of the Mississippi Mills.[83]

In November of 1898, the Mississippi Mills were back in the Chancery Court of Copiah County, as the defendant in *Wirt Adams v. Mississippi Mills*. The result of that suit was a full settlement for payment of unpaid taxes by the Mississippi Mills. The Mississippi Legislature's Act that was passed in 1882 to exempt mills from tax payment for a ten-year period had been repealed by a provision of the 1892 Revenue Law. As a result, the Mississippi Mills were indebted to Mississippi, Copiah County, and Wesson on account of unpaid taxes on its property for 1886 to 1897, owing $5,695, $9,375, and

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[81] Mississippi Mills Stockholders, *supra* note 77; Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11.
[82] Report on the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 21; Ann Wilson Day, *Wesson: A Town With a Past* (Wesson History Subject File; Mississippi Dep't of Archives & History).
[83] Copiah County Chancery Court Lawsuit (1897), *reprinted in* Wesson, Mississippi and the Mississippi Mills, *supra* note 2, at 113-117; West, *supra* note 11.

$4,930 respectively. The judgment was for Wirt Adams, the State Revenue Agent, to recover $20,000 with interest accruing from January 1, 1899.[84]

James Richardson died shortly following this judgment and there were no individual stockholders who held enough stock to justify them giving sufficient time and attention to the mills, making the necessary improvements in machinery, and remedying the problems arising from ineffective management. The stockholders brought in a new manager from the North to run the mills. Soon thereafter, industrial consultants came in from New York and brought their own supervisors that supplanted the native overseers. This was the first time the mills had used foreign management since Captain Oliver brought in the original management employees from England, and the mills had never used Northern managers and supervisors. The plan of management in which every detail was centered in Wesson was changed to one in which all buying and selling was placed in the hands of brokers of New York City.[85]

This change of management caused dissatisfaction among the workers who did not approve of management decisions and, more fundamentally, did not like the notion of Northerners coming into Wesson to dictate the running of the Mississippi Mills' affairs. Even under this new management regime, the workers' wages were not decreased, as shown by a pay envelope from July 14, 1900. Sallie Pearson worked in the mills and was paid $6.75 for working twelve days from June 18 to June 30. Although $1.00 was subtracted from this total for a visit to the doctor, this pay averaged over fifty cents a day.

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[84] Wirt Adams v. Mississippi Mills (Chancery Court Copiah County Mississippi, Nov. 26, 1898); Brief of Wirt Adams, Wirt Adams v. Mississippi Mills (Chancery Court Copiah County Mississippi, Nov. 26, 1898).

[85] Day, *supra* note 82; *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; Interview with Hank Smith (Mar. 15, 2001).

Nonetheless, labor troubles developed—unions came into the mills after the turn of the century, generating strikes and political rallies.[86]

In response to this resistance from the Southern workers, the management began to recruit outside labor to work in the mills, taking the place of local employees and increasing the work force. This method of recruiting mill workers was entirely unheard of in Wesson; the Wesson mills had always taken pride in their salvation of poor Mississippians. Despite the long time reliance on the boarding-family labor system, the new management pulled back from attracting farmers' children from the surrounding countryside and quickly settled on the family labor system. This brought the operation in line with other Southern mills and by the summer of 1905, the population of Wesson had increased again to around 4,000. That May, a group of skilled weavers from New Bedford, Massachusetts were employed under a one-year contract with the Mississippi Mills. There were twenty-five workers in this group, including several men and their wives. In one family, the father and three daughters were going to work as weavers in Wesson. The following month, a group of cotton mill experts came from Massachusetts to work in the Wesson Mills, but these new experts were not very well received in Wesson. Upon arrival, they "invested in a few kegs of beer, got drunk, and proceeded to paint the town red." Around twenty-five to thirty of the men were arrested and taken before the town court, but most were merely reprimanded by the Mayor. One of the men, however, was arrested and fined $25 for parading down the streets of Wesson with a pistol. The *Wesson Enterprise*, established in 1899 and edited by Walter W. Robertson, proclaimed that "Mississippi wants immigrants, but she does not want law-breakers." In

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[86] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 33; Interview with David Higgs (Mar. 10, 2001); Interview with Ruth Slay (Mar. 13, 2001); Lulah Regsdale, untitled manuscript; History of Wesson.

mid-August another large delegation of mill workers arrived from Tennessee. The resentment felt toward these outsiders, both management and workers, is evident from the following comment about the workforce in August of 1905: "*Nearly everyone* who lives in Wesson are hard workers."[87]

With Northern management, the Mississippi Mills had become the only Southern mill to successfully secure Northeastern labor. This change in composition of the labor force meant not only local discontent, it also meant paying higher wages to the workers in order to compete with wages paid in the Northern factories. The men, women, and children who worked in the Mississippi Mills during this time were making "good wages, having money in the bank." By 1905, the workforce had increased in number again to about 2,000 and the cost of labor had nearly doubled, with adult workers receiving $1 per day. The increase in workers and wages meant that the weekly payroll in August amounted to $5,000, $1,250 more than the payroll ten years before, and the yearly payroll totaled around $400,000.[88]

Management faced other problems, not dealing with the discontent and increased costs of the workforce, that reduced the productivity of the mills. By 1905, most of the local wood supply had been cut and burned, and in June the price of lumber advanced from $2 to $3 a cord. The mills turned to coal for fuel, but the transportation costs were high and continued to increase. Further, the cotton crop produced in 1905 was extremely

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[87] *Busy Wesson*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Aug. 18, 1905 (emphasis added); *Local Items*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Aug. 18, 1905; *Going South: Skilled Weavers of New Bedford Accept Terms Under Contract*, NEW BEDFORD STANDARD, April 25, 1905, *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, May 5, 1905; *New Employees Painted Town*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, June 27, 1905; Phillips, *Some Facts about the Early History of Wesson*, *supra* note 11.

[88] *Busy Wesson*, *supra* note 87; *As Others See Wesson*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Oct. 20, 1905; *Going South*, *supra* note 87.

small compared to the extremely large cotton crop the year before. This unfavorable news meant a tremendous falling off in production as compared to the previous year.[89]

The changing management, labor troubles, additional costs for fuel and raw materials, higher wages paid to the large number of workers, and the payment of back taxes combined to eventually make the mill operation unprofitable. The mills were forced to lay off over half of its employees, and by the end of 1905, there were only 700 mill workers. The Mississippi Mills went into receivership in early January of 1906 when D. B. Morey, one of the stockholders and creditors of the mills, filed a bill on January 13 and Judge Niles appointed Thad B. Lampton as receiver. At the time the mills went into receivership, the machinery consisted of 17,000 cotton spindles, 9,000 wool spindles, 21 sets of wool cards, 800 narrow looms, 62 broad looms, an outfit for making shoddy and preparing waste, dye house equipment for dyeing cotton and wools, and finishing machinery. The Mississippi Mills did not operate fully while in the hands of the receiver, and Judge Niles issued a decree on July 17 ordering that President R. L. Sanders sell the mills before November 1.[90]

Even though they were in receivership, the Mississippi Mills still had splendid possibilities and under the proper management, "there [was] every reason for hope of success in the future." This hope came on November 1, 1906, when the Mississippi Mills were sold to Mr. Maurice Stern of Lehman, Stern & Co. of New Orleans for $300,000.[91]

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[89] Daniel J. Sully, *The Size of the Cotton Crop*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Sept. 15, 1905.

[90] D.B. Morey v. Mississippi Mills (S.D. Miss. July 17, 1906); *Busy Wesson*, *supra* note 87; *In Hands of a Receiver*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Jan. 26, 1906; *Goes into Hands of Receiver*, *supra* note 14; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14; *Merger is Completed*, TIMES-DEMOCRAT, Jan. 27, 1907, *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, Feb. 1, 1907; *Mississippi Mills: Judge Niles Orders Them to be Sold by November 1*, HAZLEHURST COURIER, July 26, 1906.

[91] The Richardson House was bought by James G. Lyell for $400,000. *Mills Sold: New Orleans Firm Buys Those at Wesson*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Nov. 9, 1906; National Register of Historic Places Inventory, *supra* note 62.

The mills continued to run with Mr. Stern as the owner and in December a new company was organized with New Orleans officials to take over and operate the mills at Wesson, intending to make them productive and profitable once more. On December 21, the charter of the New Mississippi Mills was filed in Wesson. The incorporators included Mr. Stern, President John H. Fulton, Vice President R. M. Walmsley, and Albert Baldwin, Jr., Secretary and Treasurer. At that point, the New Mississippi Mills began contemplating a merger with the Lane-Maginnis Mills of New Orleans, and in late January of 1907, the two corporations consolidation to form the Textile Mills Corporation. This merger created a textile manufacturing plant that was the largest in the South and among the largest in the United States, and it seemed that success was imminent.[92]

With S. Odenheimer as its President and under the new management, the Textile Mills Corporation in Wesson was back in Southern hands and began to run smoothly again. Considering that the most important feature of Wesson was its mills, these new developments brought great hope for the future to the citizens of Wesson and the poor people of the surrounding Mississippi countryside were offered employment once more. Indeed, in November of 1907, a young man working in the weaving department of the Textile Mills Corporation was paid $13 for a week's work and two women in the weaving department made over $14 each that same week. The *Wesson Enterprise* proclaimed, "That doesn't look like starvation prices does it? . . . This is no bad wages for a girl to make and what [they are] doing others can do if they will only come and try."

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[92] *Goes into Hands of Receiver, supra* note 14; *Local Items*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Nov. 2, 1906; *Merger is Completed, supra* note 90; *Mills Sold, supra* note 91; *Mississippi Mills: New Company with New Orleans Officials Formed*, PICAYUNE, *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, Dec. 21, 1906; *Wesson was named for Confederate Colonel*, COPIAH COUNTY COURIER, Dec. 21, 1983

Soon thereafter, the Wesson mills hired two new weavers from Stonewall, Mississippi, and the paper continued to advertise: "Plenty of work for everybody . . . . Good health, good wages and a good time is some of the pleasures of the Wesson girls who work in the Mississippi Mills. Girls in the country who are tired of outdoor work would do well to come to Wesson and work in the Mills. There is a good job waiting for all who will come." Unfortunately for Wesson and its mills, however, that would not be the case for long.[93]

V. Child Labor Laws and the Demise of the Mills: 1906-1910

Governor James K. Vardaman took office in 1904, and under the Vardaman Administration, Mississippi developed its own variety of progressivism and the movement was beginning to gain force. Governor James K. Vardaman vetoed bills permitting corporations to acquire large holdings and permitting railroad mergers, ended the convict leasing system that made Colonel Edmund Richardson his fortune and thus directly contributed to financing the Wesson mills, and asked the legislature for, but could not achieve, child labor regulations. Because of these reforms and requests, Vardaman was considered a progressive Governor. Under the next Governor, Edmund F. Noel, the 1908 legislative session would enact regulations limiting the use of child-labor in textile mills, among other reforms, that would contribute to the demise of the Wesson Mills.[94]

The prevalence of child workers in Wesson was not unique; indeed, child labor was ingrained in Mississippi and the rest of the South, many children spending their days or nights in the noisy spinning rooms and the dusty air of cotton mills. The problem, as

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[93] *Local Items*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Nov. 1, 1907; *Merger is Completed, supra* note 90.
[94] *See generally* CHARLES GRANVILLE HAMILTON, PROGRESSIVE MISSISSIPPI 42-69 (1978).

one historian pointed out, "was not an occasional abuse or passing phenomenon. It was an entrenched interest, a growing evil that had become a normal feature of the textile industry and the foundation of fortunes." The number of children working in the mills under the age of sixteen increased 600 percent from 1880 to 1900. By 1900, child labor in the South had become the usual practice, especially in the production of textiles where 30 percent of workers in the mills were children under sixteen, and 57.5 percent of those children were between ten and thirteen. The only child labor law on the books in the Southern states in 1894 was an eight-hour day law in Alabama. Twenty-eight states had passed some type of protective regulations for children before the turn of the century, but these were mainly Northern manufacturing states.[95]

By 1905, child labor had become part of a national Progressive agenda and President Theodore Roosevelt's Annual Message recommended that the Department of Commerce and Labor investigate the conditions of child labor and the status of state child labor legislation. The President proclaimed,

> The greatest product of any country is men and women, strong of mind and body and rugged virtues. We can't hope to have this if the health of the child is impaired, its growth stunted by hard work, and its mind starved by working in younger years. The age and hours of child labor is an unquestioned prerogative of the State government to regulate and it is the duty of the State government to do so.

At the time the President made his address, Mississippi had done little in the area of child labor, exercising its prerogative to not regulate child labor.[96]

Because it was primarily an agricultural state, child labor did not confront Mississippi as early as it did other states. Few children were employed in strenuous

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[95] WALTER I. TRATTNER, CRUSADE FOR THE CHILDREN 40-41 (1970); WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 416-19.

occupations, with the exception of farms and cotton factories, and forbidding children from working on farms would cripple thousands of already impoverished families. The first suggestion for child labor legislation in Mississippi was made at the annual meeting of the King's Daughters in 1902, a committee appointed to consider a suitable child labor law. The committee recognized the growing cotton mill industry and the importance of passing a child labor law before the manufacturing interests became a dominant factor in Mississippi politics. They prepared a bill that was presented to the 1904 legislature, but the bill never emerged from the committee room due to the committee's inexperience, the legislators' failure to recognize that such regulation was needed, and general indifference.[97]

This promoted the advocates of child labor legislation to begin a public education campaign about the evils and horrors of child labor. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Woman's Temperance Union, and the Women's Federation of Clubs joined the King's Daughters committee to assist in a public appeal before the next petition to the Mississippi Legislature. They appointed press committees that starting publishing the various arguments in favor of a child labor law, believing that everyone reading the articles would agree and demand the passage of such regulations. At the national level, the National Child Labor Committee was organized in 1904 and state movements were coordinated under its direction. These local and national efforts awakened violent opposition.[98]

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[96] *Annual Message of the President*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Dec. 8, 1905; E. L. Bailey, *Mississippi*, 2 CHILD LABOR BULLETIN 129 (May 1913—Feb. 1914).
[97] Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 129; *As to the "Child Labor" Fad*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, June 28, 1907.
[98] WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 416-19; Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 129.

When the bill came before the Mississippi Legislature in 1906, the same year the Mississippi Mills were sold and became part of the Textile Mills Corporation, it met with well-organized opposition by mill owners. Attorneys for the textile mills lobbied the legislative committees to convince them that a child labor law had no place in Mississippi. They argued that his type of law was merely "a scheme on the part of New England mill owners to put Mississippi mills at a disadvantage" and an effort by "pseudo-philanthropists to earn their salaries." Although the bill managed to pass the house, it was ultimately defeated in the senate, where opposition concentrated its forces.[99]

Some of the arguments made by the mill owner opposition, and the fears that the proposal of a child labor bill brought to Wesson, can be gleaned from articles published in the *Wesson Enterprise* in 1907, just when the mills were finally up and running again. Many of these articles were written by Walter W. Robertson, the paper's editor and Wesson's Mayor for twenty-four years, who vehemently opposed the regulation of child labor and was very candid in the publication of his views. For example, Robertson attacked child-labor law advocates, noting that "[I]t is very easy for one who has plenty to live on and never had to work a day in their life to sit up in a fine home and read novels and talk about what a fine thing a child's labor law would be." The first such article was published in June and laid out a laundry list of arguments for opposing child labor laws.[100]

First and foremost, advocates failed to consider that the demands and needs of widows and children required child labor. Robertson questioned, "Are those people who are advocating a child's labor law going to send food and raiment out to the widows and

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[99] Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 129.
[100] Bloodworth, *supra* note 60; *As to the "Child Labor" Fad*, *supra* note 97.

orphans whom such a law will rob of their living?" Robertson noted that the cotton Mill owners would rather not employ children and would prefer to see them attend school, but they were simply forced to give them work to help out "when their mothers come and tell them that unless their children can get work they will suffer." For example, one man in Wesson deserted his wife and children and they were on the verge of starvation until she put two of her children to work in the mills, providing them food and shelter. Another widow went to the mill owners earlier that year seeking work for her children because she was invalid and her husband had just passed away, leaving them nothing to live on. Although the owners said they were too small to work in the mills, they took the children in and gave them light job so that the family could stay together. There would be no problem with a child labor law if they had a husband and father to work for them, but these orphans simply had to work or starve.[101]

Second, in most instances, child labor would mean comfortable clothing, shoes, food, shelter, and an education for children, as well as restraint from the "1000 temptations that beset the unguarded children of hard working widows." Along these lines, a former employee of the Wesson mills stated that the children working in the mills "are faring 100 times better than the little urchins that roam the streets, who are experts in the use of profanity and who are cigarette fiends." While formal education was important to prepare children for life, the mill would teach children along practical lines. Third, the low wages paid for work in cotton factories often demanded the united efforts of the

[101] *As to the "Child Labor" Fad, supra* note 97.

entire household to make a living. Prohibiting child labor would bring distress, discomfort, and suffering to many children and already struggling households.[102]

Fourth, the work done by the children in the mills was not difficult and did not pose health risks to the children. Every last child in the mills enjoyed the best of health and the overseers knew the circumstances of each child that worked under them, were very kind to them, watched over them, and gave them easy work. Robertson proclaimed that "the happiest lot of children who work in the Mills" would be found in Wesson; "they romp and play to and from their work as happily as can be." The children were treated so well and enjoyed the work so much that frequently the girls who grew up in the mills and eventually married would want to return to work in the mills even after marriage. Finally, several of the most prominent men and women in Wesson went to the mills as orphans and grew up in the mills as child laborers. Those individuals were living examples that children were not worked to death in the mills. Additionally, some of the orphan girls who worked in the mills grew up to be "stout, healthy, fine looking women and married splendid gentlemen."[103]

An "Ex-Mill Operator" published a retort to Robertson's article in a July issue of the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*. The Operator responded that even though the assertion that Wesson's mill children were happy and healthy and had become some of the most prominent men in town may sound good to the outside world, "God only knows it sounds like a fish story to the almost worked to death and almost infants who toll year in and year out in the great cotton mills for eleven to twelve hours a day." Having spent the greatest portion of his life in a Southern mill, the Operator defied anyone to show him a

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[102] *As to the "Child Labor" Fad, supra* note 97; *The Mills at Wesson: Correspondent Makes Reply to Recent Charges*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, July 19, 1907.

man or woman in Wesson who had continuously worked in the mills from youth until thirty and was still healthy and had any ambition left to continue on until old age.[104]

Not surprisingly, a citizen of Wesson and former employee of the Mississippi Mills, William Thorldon Hays, was quick to give the "wholly ignorant" Ex-Mill Operator numerous examples of people in Wesson who spent most of their life in the mills. John Thompson, foreman of the weaving department, had been employed at the Wesson Mills and was also a Justice of the Peace in Copiah County. W. J. Allen, foreman of the woolen spinning and carding department, began his work in the mills as an orphan. Another man who was both master mechanic for the mills and a member of the Board of Aldermen spent most of his life at the mills. Stevens, foreman of the spooling and warping department and a member of the school board of trustees, spent the greater part of his life in a cotton factory. Further, Hays himself worked in the mills from age ten until he was twenty, all the time in good health. After obtaining his education by studying at night and attending the Wesson public high school every other year, Hays went on to spend two years at an out-of-state university. Indeed, many children working in their mills used the money they made while employed there to attend school and went on to make some of the brightest students in college. It is worth noting, however, that all of the specific references to healthy, ambitious, and fortunate individuals were to men who worked in the mills as children and were eventually placed in management or supervisory positions. Considering that the majority of the workforce was female, the omission of similarly successful women suggests that they were not so fortunate.[105]

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[103] *As to the "Child Labor" Fad*, *supra* note 97.
[104] *Correspondent Makes Reply to Recent Charges*, *supra* note 102.
[105] *Id.*

Hays was also quick to explain that even people who weren't citizens of Wesson recognized that the children employed at the Wesson Mills were both safe and satisfied with their employment. On May 1, 1901, President William McKinley addressed the workers of the mills, claiming that he believed he was looking into the faces of the happiest, healthiest, and most content crowd of mill operatives he had ever come across. When the Honorable Charles Scott visited Wesson in July 1907, he commented that the girls working in the mills were the prettiest he had seen in the state. Additionally, Reverend William Spurgeon of England said that the people in the Wesson mills were like students of some great college rather than workers.[106]

William Hays is not the only mill worker to speak highly of their experience working as a child laborer in the Mississippi Mills. In 1979, Mrs. Bob Watson, who also worked as a child in the Wesson mills, recalled, "I loved my work, as did everyone employed at the mills." Mrs. Watson began school in Wesson when she was five years old, but her father died when she was young and by the age of nine, she quit school and started working in the Mississippi Mills. She worked in the mills until she was twenty-one, from 1895 to 1907. She lived in one of the duplex houses rented to mill workers, and slept on the floor on pallets with her two brothers and four sisters. Even though her formal education stopped when she went to the mills, she received tutoring at night from a private school teacher in Wesson. She also belonged to the Wesson Baptist Church. Her first job at the mills, at age nine, was "sweeping." She was paid twenty-five cents a day for the first month, and was given a ten cents raise later on. They soon moved her to the spinning room where she was paid four or five dollars a week. Later on, she worked in the weaving room and was paid by the piece. She met Bob Watson while working in

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[106] *Id.*

the mills, where he also worked, and they were married by a Justice of the Peace when she was twenty-one.[107]

Tom S. Haynie lived in Wesson for about fourteen years, and "his two oldest boys worked in the Wesson mills before they were eleven years old from choice and not from necessity." They handled their own money, had their own accounts at the stores, and thus learned the textile business and self-reliance, the best lesson a child could learn. Haynie also commented, "I have always considered the Wesson mills the best orphan asylum and widow's home I know of, for the greatest, most useful charity is that which helps others to help themselves." He saw many widows and children, families with children too small and weak to work on a farm, and poor girls unable to do the hard work on the farms come to Wesson, get inexpensive rooms or homes with their children, find work in the mills, and prosper. In hundreds of instances, these children would grow up to be noble men and women, respected and honored.[108]

Advocates of child labor laws were unconvinced by the mill owners' arguments and the child worker "success" stories, and they were not discouraged by the child labor bill's failure in 1906. They realized, however, that the proposal lost due to lack of organization, failure to recognize the opposition's power, and lack of specific information regarding the child labor conditions in Mississippi. Alexander J. McKelway, a young minister and editor from North Carolina who was Secretary of the National Child Labor Committee for the Southern States at the time, advised advocates regarding effective methods to use in their attempts to convince the 1908 Mississippi Legislature to pass a child labor law. McKelway also sent Dr. Alfred H. H. Seddon of Atlanta, Georgia to

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[107] Hamilton, *Worked as child in Wesson Mills*, *supra* note 22; Telephone Interview with Lucile Horton (Mar. 17, 2001).

Mississippi to investigate textile factory conditions across the state and compile a report to be used in the legislature. In early December of 1907, Reverend Seddon made his way to Wesson to observe the mills and the children laboring there.[109]

The people of Wesson did not welcome Reverend Seddon to their town, especially Walter Robertson. Meeting with the Reverend during his trip, Robertson explained to him that the "Mississippi Mills makes splendid men and women out of children, instead of dwarfs, as some would have it appear." He also told the Reverend that he was adamantly opposed to the child labor bill because it would rob the helpless and deserted widows and orphans of Wesson. Robertson raised the point that enforcing Mississippi's vagrant law would be more effective than the child labor bill in preventing idle fathers from making their children work in the mills and forcing these lazy men to work and send their children to school. Section 5055 of the Mississippi Code provided, "All persons who are able to work and do not work, but hire out their minor children or allow them to be hired out, and live upon their wages shall be punished as vagrants" and jailed for thirty days without bail. If this law were simply enforced, it would remedy a situations similar to a recent occurrence in the Wesson mills where some children went to work crying, saying that their father beat them out of their beds and made them go to the mills without any breakfast. Robertson proposed that advocates of the law should go to the Mayor and report these fathers or give their names to the Marshall. Another option would be to "have a state officer appointed whose duty it will be to visit every section of

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[108] Tom S. Haynie, FARMER ADVOCATE, *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, Jan. 24, 1908.
[109] WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 416-19; Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 129-30; *The Child's Labor Law*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Dec. 13, 1907.

the state, look for vagrants and have them arrested." Either of these methods would stop these father without "work[ing] a hardship on innocent people."[110]

In reporting the results of his discussions with Reverend Seddon in the *Wesson Enterprise*, Robertson wrote, "People in other States would do well to look after their own home affairs." First, he was pleased to report that the Reverend found that the Wesson mills were a great improvement over the other mills he had visited across the state. Second, the Reverend said that the child labor bill would include a provision allowing the helpless and deserted children of the widows in Wesson to work. Third, the Reverend had no idea that Mississippi already had a vagrant law and upon learning about this, he said that this was just the type of law that he wanted. After reporting this positive news, Robertson commented that the Reverend "ought to be at home looking over his own flock." He then proceeded to quote Jesus as saying, "Take heed that no man deceive you"—while Reverend Seddon said his visit was in the name of the children, a child labor law would rob orphans of their living. Robertson also lamented that a child labor law would bring more sorrow to Wesson than any law that could ever be passed—Jesus also said, "All these are the beginnings of sorrows."[111]

Although the accuracy of Robertson's account is questionable, he did correctly predict that the Reverend's visit to Wesson was the beginning of their sorrows. Reverend Seddon's report showed that each of the twenty-one Mississippi cotton mills employed children under twelve, many working more than twelve hours a day in unsanitary surroundings. Armed with this specific information regarding child labor in the mills, the Mississippi Child Labor Committee was formed in December 1907 in response to a call

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[110] *The Child's Labor Law*, *supra* note 109; *Enforce the Law*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Aug. 30, 1907.
[111] *The Child's Labor Law*, *supra* note 109.

for all those interested in child labor legislation to meet in Jackson. Following Reverend Seddon's report and the coordination of this Mississippi branch of the National Committee, a legislative committee composed of "distinguished churchmen, eminent jurists, broad-minded school officials, men of recognized political influence and philanthropic women" was appointed to work on the issue of child labor in Mississippi.[112]

Governors Vardaman and Noel urged the Mississippi Legislature to take action. As Governor Vardaman declared in his farewell message to the legislature in January 1908, "We are living in a period which will mark a turning point in the life of the state." In the most comprehensive reform program he had proposed to date, Governor Vardaman urged elimination of child labor:

> The greatest blessing that a beneficent providence can bestow upon a state are strong men, vigorous in mind and body, and pure, virtuous women with physical force undistorted by fashion, or misshapen by misfortune—the perfect image of the creator. To secure that blessing to the common-wealth, the children of the poor must be protected from the errors of ignorance, the burdens of poverty and the crime of greed. It becomes my duty again to urge upon the legislature the duty of the state in protecting the children who toll in the factories and other workshops; to prescribe by law the hours that they shall be worked; their environment, and to save them from the soul-quenching, body-distorting and health-destroying task ordeal which they are required to perform in the ordinary factory.

Although such legislation was not obtained in the Vardamen Administration, his successor, Governor Noel, also supported child labor reform and would have more success with the legislature.[113]

Mississippi was the next to last state to pass a child labor law, although many rural states passed such measures only shortly before Mississippi. By the time the 1908

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[112] Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 129-130.
[113] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 66; *Governor's Message*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Jan. 17, 1908; Charles Granville Hamilton, Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era, 1904-1920, at 145 (1958) (thesis, Vanderbilt University).

bill to regulate child labor was introduced, 6,000 of the workers in the cotton and woolen mills across the state were children; half of those children were illiterate, tubercular, or both. The children in the mills were paid fifty-seven cents a week, half the wages paid to adult workers. Early in the 1908 legislative session, Senator James R. McDowell, a church leader who had been Governor Longino's secretary, submitted a bill that provided for a fourteen-year age limit in any industry, required school age children working in the mill to attend school at least part time, set an eight-hour day, and prohibited night work for children under sixteen. It also required parents to certify that it was essential for the child to work and a certificate from a doctor showing that the child's health allowed such work.[114]

Recognizing the power of the opposition, church leaders and women's organizations joined forces to strongly advocate the passage of the bill, primarily putting forth humanitarian and religious arguments. Chief Justice Whitfield of the Mississippi Supreme Court, a Vardaman appointee, was also an active advocate of the bill. He circulated among the legislators numerous copies of a speech written by Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge against child labor and wrote that the railroads' opposition to restricting child labor on state rights grounds was "fantastic and grotesque." Despite this support, Senator McDowell faced much opposition to the bill from employers of child labor and legislators from their counties.[115]

Many members of the legislature believed that the child labor law would work a serious hardship on widows and their children, that giving employment to poor children was philanthropic work, that its passage would cripple the developing industries of the

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[114] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 66; Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 130.
[115] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 66-67.

state, and that those favoring the law were influenced solely by unjustified sentiment. With these legislators against the bill and lobbyists surrounding the capital condemning this "injustice to mills and hardship to families," it took persistence for McDowell to save his bill from dying in committee. Rather than accept defeat, McDowell decided to compromise by reducing the age limit to twelve years and eliminating the school attendance requirement.[116]

Opposing forces still fought every section, offering amendments to defeat the effectiveness of the bill and attempting to defeat it as a whole. Representatives C.E. Hood and Walter Robertson of Copiah County, home of the Wesson mills, would only support the child labor law if it had some sort of measure that provided for families with a widowed mother or invalid father. They wanted a provision either allowing this class of children to work or providing for their support until they were of age to work. An amendment was offered to exempt "children of invalid fathers and widowed mothers and orphan children," but it was defeated. Representative Hood believed that without such a provision, the Senate bill, if passed, would harm the very people that its advocates hoped to protect. Thus, he felt it was his duty to oppose the bill, even though it was not considered the "popular" thing to do. Representative Robertson was so disappointed with the Senate bill that he even introduced a competing bill to establish a whipping post in every Mississippi jail for punishing able-bodied married men who willfully refused to work and support their wives and children, but instead lived on the wages of their working children. Senators Malcolm Franklin and William Anderson representing

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[116] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 67.

Columbus and Tupelo, which also had mills employing children, defended child labor and Senator Anderson declared that mill work was "a positive benefaction to children."[117]

Even with this opposition from legislators from mill counties, an amendment that limited the bill to cotton and woolen mills was adopted. Prohibiting child labor in the textile industry, but not in agriculture or other fields, provoked arguments that the bill was an effort to prevent industrialization in the South, a result that was compelled by the loss of Northern textiles during the Civil War and the North freeing blacks from slavery. People believed that this bill was merely an effort to take the children from the Southern factory and send them back to the cotton field to raise more cotton for Northern factories. Tom S. Haynie from Wesson criticized advocates of the bill, even the "nicest, most tender-hearted ladies in the land" that supported its passage:

> Some ladies from the North stopped over night in a factory town in South Carolina and saw some children going home from the mills after dark with lanterns to light their way, and forgetting the freezing, starving children in the sweatshops and on the streets in the North, they raised a crusade against child labor in the South.

He noted that if these advocates of child labor laws would travel a few miles from the mill towns, they would find farmers' children going home in the dark because they were too poor to buy lanterns. In reality, working in the mills provided a better opportunity for the thousands of poor farm children laboring in the fields. A law forbidding children under age twelve from working in the factories but not on the farms, would simply push the children out of the mills and into the hands of a farmer who needs a young girl or boy to drudge and slave for him. Haynie argued that the "Wesson mills is heaven itself when

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[117] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 67; *Representative Hood Opposes the Child Labor Law*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Feb. 7, 1908; *Touched a Soft Spot*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, April 9, 1909.

compared to the life led by the children of the average renter or share-hand on the farm."[118]

A final amendment to reduce the age limit from twelve years to ten was defeated, and the McDowell bill was passed in the Senate by a vote of twenty-nine to eleven and in the House by an eighty-three to twenty-two vote. "An Act to regulate the employment of children in mills, factories and manufacturing establishments in this state" was enacted on March 21, 1908, the last day of the legislative session. Mississippi's law provided that no child under age twelve could work in any mill, factory, or manufacturing establishment engaged in manufacturing or working in cotton, wool, or other fabrics. For children under sixteen, it included a ten hour work day and a fifty-eight hour work week limit and prohibited night work between 7:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. Additionally, a certificate of consent from the parents of a child under sixteen was required, including the child's date of birth and the child's last school attendance and grade level attained. The bill also provided for county sheriffs to inspect the mills in their county once every month and for health officers to visit the mills twice a year. Violation of the law constituted a misdemeanor, and the penalty was a fine or imprisonment.[119]

In addition to the child labor law, the 1908 legislature acted upon other progressive proposals. Senator E.A. Rowan of Wesson introduced a bill in the Senate that would prevent wage discrimination against women in Mississippi. It prohibited an employer from discriminating "in the wages paid to men and women where the same work is performed by them" and provided that no employer "shall discharge a woman from their employ for immoral conduct, and retain men guilt of the same or like immoral

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[118] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 67; Haynie, *supra* note 108.
[119] 1908 Miss. Laws 88; HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 67; Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 130.

acts." Although the legislature did not pass Senator Rowan's bill, it did pass, with little opposition, a bill prohibiting discrimination against union members in the telephone, telegraph, and railroad industries, making offenders liable in damages. An amendment to the same bill to prohibit picketing was defeated. Legislation protecting the right to belong to a union, to strike, and to picket, was unusual for such a non-industrial state, and influenced other fields of labor in Mississippi.[120]

The labor legislation passed in 1908 worked an extreme hardship on the citizens of Wesson, especially its widows and children as predicted, and crippled the Wesson mills so severely that they would never be able to recover. After the mill owners lost their six-year fight against the child labor law, they accepted the result and obeyed the law. This meant that all the children under twelve who were working in the Wesson mills had to quit and that those under sixteen were forced to work shorter hours. The front page of the January 29, 1909 issue of the *Wesson Enterprise* published the story of a poor deserted woman whose children were taken away from her by the courts in Chicago after Illinois enacted their child labor law. Robertson responded that there were also children in Wesson who were deserted by their fathers and had suffered just as much as the Chicago family due to the passage of Mississippi's child labor law. The only difference was that the Mississippi courts had not yet taken these hungry children away from their poor, helpless mothers. He also criticized Governor Noel and Senator McDowell for convincing a majority of the legislature, who did not fully comprehend the situation, to pass a law that brought such hardships on the helpless widows and children; such a law had its "origin in hell, and the people who caused such laws to be enacted will have a hard time keeping out of hell, too." Robertson further proclaimed, "There was no

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[120] HAMILTON, *supra* note 94, at 68-69; *The Wages of Women*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Jan. 31, 1908.

more deceit and viciousness in the Serpent that told Eve that it would be good for her and Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit than there is in a law that pretends to protect children and at the same time force them to suffer thousands of agonizing pains from hunger."[121]

Senator McDowell responded to Robertson's editorial by offering aid to all the children of Wesson who needed help. Although he had never heard of a case of starvation in Mississippi, he commented that if the child labor law had pushed Wesson's children to the verge of starvation then there was surely some means that could be devised to save them. If Robertson would send him the names, ages, and other information of the children who need a home or who were receiving others' charity, then he would do all he could to help. He further pointed out that it would be better for the widows and indigent fathers who needed help raising their families to accept assistance from more fortunate members of the community until their children turned twelve rather than sacrifice their health and future for the meager amount children earn at such a young age. Recognizing that Robertson's opposition to the law was approved by some of his constituents, Senator McDowell questioned whether Robertson's whipping post bill was suggested by the people of Copiah or himself. He also reminded Robertson that Governor Noel merely signed the bill and that any of the other candidates for governor would have done the same thing. If there was any credit for having passed the law, he was willing to share it with all those who favored its passage, and if any blame attached to its passage, he was willing to shoulder it all. Further, Senator McDowell firmly believed that the Mississippi courts would uphold the constitutionality of the law.[122]

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[121] Bailey, *supra* note 96, at 132; *The Child Labor Law*, *supra* note 109.
[122] *Touched a Soft Spot*, *supra* note 117.

Robertson replied that he would gather all the names of the children who had to quit work, thereby working a hardship on them, and provide them to Senator McDowell. He also noted that while Senator McDonnell may not have ever heard of anyone starving to death in Mississippi, he also had probably never heard of a child being worked to death in any mill in Mississippi, and there had never been such a case in the Wesson mills. On April 2, 1909, Robertson published an article in the *Wesson Enterprise* asking for the names of all of the children of poor widows and invalid and helpless fathers in Wesson who were forced to quit working in the mills after the passage of the child labor law.[123]

The Mississippi Mills did not fare any better than the people of Wesson following the child labor law's enactment in 1908. The mills lost a large number of child workers and thus their advantage over the Northern mills in procuring an abundant supply of inexpensive labor. At the same time, they began to experience labor difficulties again and Wesson Local 684 of the United Textile Workers of America was formed. The mills could not afford to hire white adult workers to take the place of the children who left the mills without decreasing the amount paid to the adult workers. At the same time, parents needed a wage increase because their children could no longer work to supplement their families' already low income, and the mills were financially unable to give the adult workers a raise. At this point, the mills could have chosen to hire black men and women to take over the simple operations that the children previously performed and pay them similarly low wages. Rather than integrate the mills and break the tradition of employing only white workers that began with Colonel Wesson, the Wesson Mills chose to shut down part of their operations in 1908 and began to run on half time. According to the 1908 Census, a great many people left Wesson that year, including at least forty-four

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[123] *Help for the Helpless*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, April 2, 1909; *Touched a Soft Spot*, *supra* note 117.

children who presumably returned to the countryside to work with their families on the farms or left Wesson with their families to seek higher wages in other mills or entirely different occupations.[124]

The Textile Mill Corporation also began to experience trouble with its operations in New Orleans. In August of 1908, several hundred employees of the Lane-Maginnis Mills went on strike after the company announced a twenty percent reduction in wages. Odenheimer, President of the corporation and manager of these New Orleans workers for twenty-two years, said that if the mills attempted to pay the old wage scale, it would be financial disaster for all; the mills would close down and hundreds of workers would be unemployed. The reduction was made not because the mill wanted to increase profits, but because the continued depression of the cotton market put the price of the commodity at such a low figure that it was impossible to operate at even a bare maintenance basis unless the wage cut became effective. Odenheimer proposed that the employees examine the books of the company to verify the gravity of the situation and if the accountants did not agree, he would honor the strikers' demands. Although he would rather not reduce the workers' already low wages, economic circumstances compelled him to do so.[125]

The business conditions in New Orleans were better than most other cities; mills all over the country began to close down entirely, reduce operations, or make wage cuts. Some time before May of 1909, these conditions caught up with the Wesson Mills as well, and they were idle for at least a brief period. In early May, Mayor Thompson of Wesson received a telegram from another mill saying they could use all the workers in

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[124] *Textile Mill Operative From Wesson Struck and Killed by Train*, PICAYUNE SPECIAL, Feb. 22, 2009, *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, Feb. 26, 1909; *Wesson Lost Only 44 Children in Last Count*, Feb. 5, 1909; Telephone Interview with Ann Smith (Mar. 12, 2001).

Wesson that were currently out of work. The Mayor immediately went to management to inquire about the likelihood of the mills resuming operation, and he was assured that they would reopen soon. The mills began operating again on May 7, but if they had not, the majority of workers would have been forced to leave Wesson to find employment in another mill.[126]

Although the Wesson mills were reopened and the workers were employed again, this good fortune would not last long; the mills would close down within the year. The price of cotton dropped $5.85 a bale in January of 1910 and a mild winter promoted an influx of boll weevils that made it difficult to find cotton for the mills. Mills all over the South closed or cut production and in February 1910 the Textile Mills Corporation, composed of the Lane and Maginnis mills in New Orleans as well as the Wesson mills, went into the hands of the receivers. At the same time, the workers in the Wesson plant, similar to the employees in New Orleans, were dissatisfied with the wages they were receiving. Experienced workers were only being paid $1.25 for working a twelve hour day and could be making as much as $1.75 in other Southern mills.[127]

Shortly after the Textile Mills Corporation went into receivership, the Wesson employees demanded a raise of fifty cents per day. Local management officials told the workers that they would ask President Odenheimer at the New Orleans home office for the increase, but they warned the workers that if they struck, the mills would be closed. The workers did not wait until word came back on the increase and did not heed management's warning, but instead walked out on strike. The workers had been on strike

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[125] *Lane & Maginnis Mills Strike*, UNITED LABOR JOURNAL (New Orleans), *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, Aug. 28, 1908.
[126] *Mississippi Mills Resume Operations Monday*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, May 7, 1909.

for a week or two when Odenheimer came to Wesson on a Saturday to attempt negotiations. He told the workers that he felt sure that he could give them a twenty-five cents raise, increasing their wages to $1.50 a week, but that he could not afford any more than that due to the economic troubles the company faced. He pleaded with them to return to work on Monday at their current wage of $1.25 per hour, and said that once they were back to work he would review the finances to see about giving them at least a partial raise. If they continued the strike, he threatened to simply close down the mills, move the machinery to the factory in New Orleans, and focus on maintaining the mill operations there. The workers did not believe his ultimatum and refused to go back to work on Monday. True to his words, Odenheimer locked the gates and closed the mills that Monday morning for good.[128]

By March, the Lane and Maginnis plants of New Orleans had ceased operations, in addition to the Wesson plant. All three factories were supposed to reopen that month, but a glitch in the arrangements of the receivers prevented this from happening and the receivers could not make any promises as to when the mills would be up and running. The Lane cotton mills did eventually reopen while in receivership, but the week of May 6, 1910, the Lane mills, which usually employed 500 people, did not resume work on Monday morning. When the wheels stopped Saturday night, the workers were told that

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[127] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 33; Day, *supra* note 82; Interview with Elene Hutson (Mar. 14, 2001); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001).

[128] Hamilton, *Wesson Scene*, *supra* note 13; *Wesson was named for Confederate Colonel*, *supra* note 92; Tammy M. Smith, *One Wesson Mill building remains*, SOUTHWEST MISSISSIPPI SHOPPING BAG, Oct. 16, 1989; Interview with Nancy Hamilton (Mar. 17, 2001); Interview with Mike Hux (Mar. 12, 2001); Interview by David Higgs with Wilmer F. Williams (July 8, 1994).

the factory would be idle until further notice. The Maginnis and Wesson mills would also remain closed due to lack of funds.[129]

The closing of the Wesson mills devastated the town and its inhabitants. On March 16, 1910, Senator McDowell came through on his promise to Robertson and the legislature passed "An Act for the relief of the indigent and suffering citizens of Wesson, Mississippi." This authorized the Mayor and Board of Aldermen of Wesson to use $500 out of the general funds of the city treasury "for the relief of the indigent and suffering citizens of the city." At the same time, advertisements began to appear in the *Wesson Enterprise* offering employment to the unemployed people of Wesson, such as the following appearing on March 25: "We can give steady employment to twelve additional families at our Mills situated in East Chattanooga, Tennessee. Healthy location; plenty of churches and schools; good water; pay day every two weeks; no commissaries; experienced help earns from $1.00 to $1.75 per day. Will not give employment to anyone under fourteen years of age." In response to the numerous advertisements for job opportunities outside Wesson, people began to leave town and their homes were sold for $10 to $40.[130]

On July 8, 1910, the *Wesson Enterprise* announced that the Mississippi Mills, still owned by the Textile Mills Corporation of New Orleans and in receivership, would be sold on August 5 and 6. Roberston was very optimistic about this sale, concluding that the sale would hopefully mean that "the mills will soon resume operations and Wesson will again be on the biggest boom in all the history of the town and dwelling houses will be in great demand." Because the mills were the largest enterprise in the South, they

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[129] *Lane Mills Close: 500 Made Idle*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, May 6, 1910; *Mills Will Not Reopen As First Announced*, TIMES DEMOCRAT, *reprinted in* WESSON ENTERPRISE, March 11, 1910.

provided employment to some 2000 people when in operation, and the property was still extremely valuable, the mills would not stand still long. Robertson assured the people of Wesson, "Of course the mills will run again and I do not believe the time is far distant when the old whistle will toot three times a day and every wheel in the great structures will be turning and every house in town filled with good people and others coming."[131]

Unfortunately, however, the *Wesson Enterprise* reported on August 5 that the mills were still idle, there were no good prospects of their resuming operations in the near future, and their residence property was still decreasing in value daily. Following this news, four out of five people moved from Wesson seeking employment and the population went from 5,000 to barely 1,000 in twelve months. The mills were eventually sold, but instead of resuming operations, the machinery was shipped around the country and the building that had housed the mills was wrecked and sold off brick by brick.[132]

Some historians cite the Mississippi Mills as the South's single best example of post-war economic recovery.[133] Considering that the mills' moment in history was during Reconstruction, it is only fitting that its glory was so brief and that the famous mills were doomed to close. Ultimately, it is doubtful that the failure could have been avoided. From the beginning, industrialism was weak in the South and the Wesson mills were the result of the leadership, management skills, and business sense of a few extraordinary textile entrepreneurs. At the same time, the mills and their owners relied upon inexpensive labor, including child labor, available during the depression in the South, to

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[130] 1908 Miss. Laws 89; WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 33; WESSON ENTERPRISE, Mar. 25, 1910.
[131] *Mississippi Mills to be Sold Soon: And Wesson Will Soon be on a Big Boom Again*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, July 8, 1910.
[132] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 30; *Local Items*, WESSON ENTERPRISE, Aug. 5, 1910; *Wesson was named for Confederate Colonel*, *supra* note 92; Interview by David Higgs with Earl Stringer (July 8, 1994); David Higgs Interview with Wilmer F. Williams (July 8, 1994).
[133] WALKER & HIGGS, *supra* note 9, at 32; Williams & Little, *supra* note 14.

successfully compete with Northern textile industries. In 1908, the Mississippi Mills certainly were not ready for child labor laws, unions, or, for that matter, the progressive era in Mississippi. Without the proper management and workforce, the Wesson mills fell behind other textile mills, in both the North and the South, that were able to maintain productions in spite of economic difficulties. It was a devastating blow to Wesson, but ultimately a move in the right direction.

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